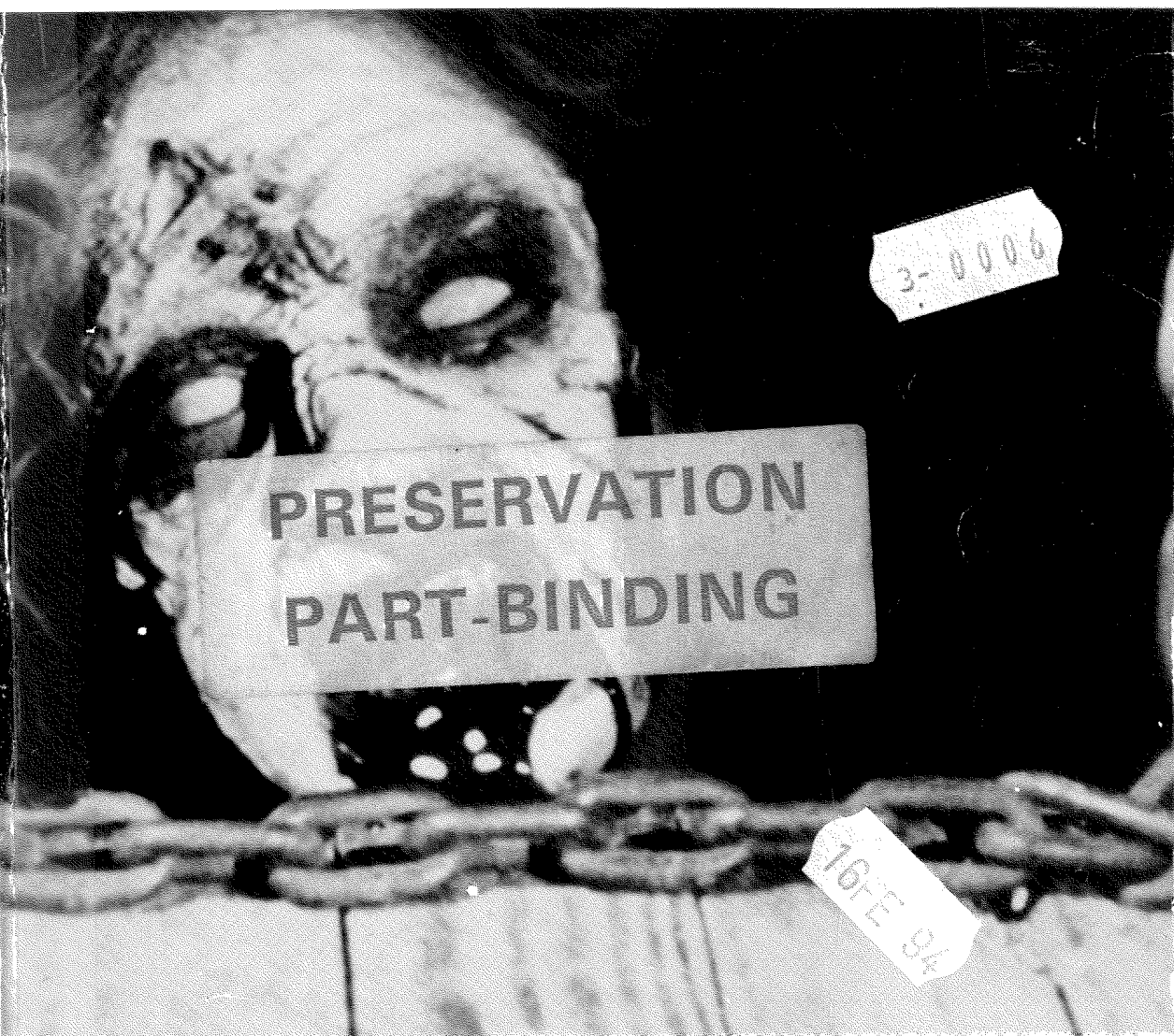


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Body Horror

HORRORITY— THE TEXTUALITY OF CONTEMPORARY HORROR FILMS

BY PHILIP BROPHY

'HORRORITY' WAS WRITTEN in mid-'83 during what appears to have been (on reflection) the peak of a small 'golden period' of the contemporary horror film. The article serves as a general introduction to certain characteristics of the contemporary horror film which distinguish this particular phase of horror from previous ones. The act of showing over the act of telling; the photographic image versus the realistic scene; the destruction of the family, the body, etc; and a perverse sense of humour all go toward qualifying these films as contemporary, both in terms of social entertainment and cinematic form.

The following two and a half years has seen many new developments, from the hysteria surrounding 'video nasties' to the maturing of many horror auteurs. Serious discussion is then needed on, respectively, the politics of taste (what makes one able to/not able to watch a horror movie?) and personal tonalities of the genre (how does one film-maker sustain thematic continuity within a genre *about genre*?). And even that would be pruning our problematics. The horror film could very well hold many keys to problems which the cinema will be addressing (or avoiding) for some time to come: How does one qualify genre *now*? What effects have the dichotomies of horror/terror and telling/showing had on the development of cinematic language? What are the relationships between certain aspects of pornography and certain aspects of the cinema? What defines our notion of *special* effects in the cinema? How does one provide a *critical* voice for exploitation in the writing of the history of the cinema?

'Horrority' does not even get to ask these questions, but rather points out that something *different* is happening in these films.

We're only on the front porch of a monstrous mansion full of critical zombies waiting to be awakened and engaged. Soon enough – we'll be in the basement

Philip Brophy, September 1985

THE WORD

Phrases are coined; terms are invented; metaphors are employed. The invention of language always carries a blasphemous tone, be it comical, opportunistic or hypothetical. The invention is devoid of linguistic validation though the effect is unavoidably semantic. The neologism exercises language as the utility that its design describes. It is said that there has already been a word invented for everything that needs to be said. By the same token, some new things that need to be said need new words invented for them.

In August 1979, the first issue of the American magazine *Fangoria* was released. It is a bi-monthly magazine devoted to horror movies. The title speaks volumes: gore, fantasy, phantasmagoria, fans. It simultaneously expands a multiplicity of cross-references and contracts them into a referential construct. This semantic effect strangely echoes the relationship between the emergence of *Fangoria* and the development of the contemporary horror film, whereby an ever-growing cult journal expands and contracts a critical voice for a mutant market – that of the contemporary film: a genre about genre; a displaced audience; a short-circuiting entertainment.

Another word is invented. More pretentious in tone and more theoretical in intention: 'Horrorality' – horror, textuality, morality, hilarity. In the same way that *Fangoria* celebrates the re-birth of the Horror genre, 'Horrorality' celebrates the precise nature of what constitutes the films of this re-birth as texts. As neologisms, both words do not so much 'mean' something as they do describe a specific historical juncture, a cultural phase that is as fixed as the semantic accuracy of the words.

THE OBJECT

The modern horror film is a strange animal. A camouflaged creature, it has generally been accorded a less than prominent place in the institution of the Cinema, due mainly to the level at which its difference (its specificity, its textuality) is articulated. It is a genre which mimics itself mercilessly – because its statement is coded within its very mimicry.

Increasingly throughout the first half of the Seventies, the Horror film defied itself, distancing itself immensely from what historically had been defined as the genre, incorporating the hey-days of the Universal,

Hammer and Toho studios and the legacy of Roger Corman and Herschal Gordon Lewis. To make a broad distinction, the Seventies have heralded a double death for Genre in general, as critically and theoretically it became a problematic which more and more could not bear its own weight, and, in terms of audiences and commerciality, it was diffused, absorbed and consumed by that decade's gulping, belching plug-hole: Realism. Nonetheless, Horror films were always being made, though their attraction was usually minor, punctuated by mainstream successes that provided well-crafted Horror: *The Abominable Doctor Phibes* (1971); *Last House on the Left* (1972); *The Exorcist* and *Sisters* (1973); and *Carrie* (1976), for example. However, it was the transition period between 1978 and 1979 that clearly announced the rebirth (at least popularly if not also critically) of the Horror film, culminating in (i) the mainstream successes of *Halloween* (1978), an independent production made by newcomer John Carpenter, and *Alien* (1979), a big-budget production by another newcomer, Ridley Scott; and (ii) the cementing of the underground status of George Romero with *Dawn of the Dead* (1979) and David Cronenberg with *The Brood* (1979). The historical door of the Horror genre was reopened, allowing discovery of Romero's *Martin* (1978), *The Crazies* (1973) and the classic *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), as well as Cronenberg's *Rabid* (1977) and *Shivers* (1976).

In 1983 the contemporary Horror film is definitely a felt presence, with the never-ending onslaught of Horror films reaching large audiences, a rejuvenation of the Drive-In circuit, the rise in video libraries and the increasing value and relevance that the genre currently holds not only for mainstream film audiences but also for rock culture and film culture. A major problem still exists, though, in the domain of mainstream film criticism (i.e. taste arbitration for those who would 'benefit' from it) and film distribution, where the former has no critical language to encompass the contemporary Horror film while the latter is ignorant of the marketing potential that these films have. Thus, the bulk of my horror film viewing over the past four-five years has consisted of Drive-In doubles, Dusk-to-Dawns and hired video cassettes. (Most of these films do not reach a cinema theatre in Australia.) It is this state of affairs that constitutes the displaced audience of the contemporary Horror film.

THE TEXT

My first problem (among many) in speaking of the textuality of the contemporary Horror film is in dislocating it from its more traditional generic overtones. It is a strategy that involves handling the films themselves like freshly severed limbs: objects both on their own and obviously fragmented. A history of generic study already clothes the Horror genre, encompassing the politics of (films like) *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*; the philosophy of (films like) *The Incredible Shrinking Man*; the sexuality of *Dracula*; and the morality of *Frankenstein*. The fantasy film

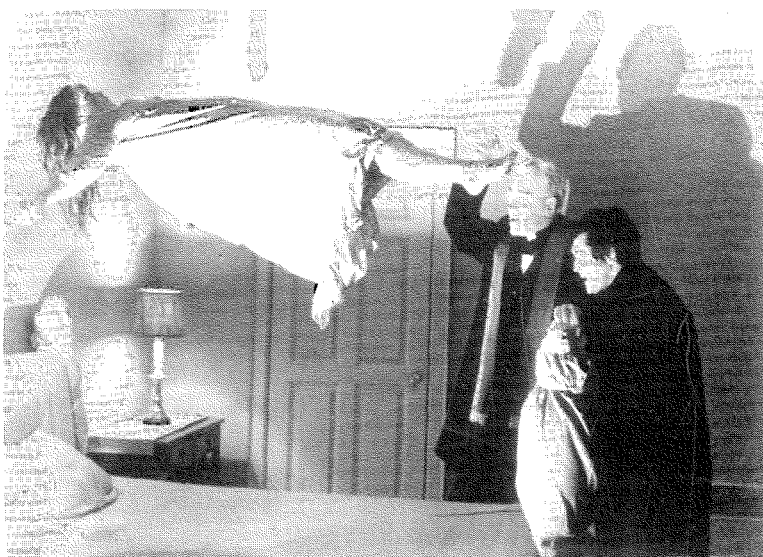
in general has provided a morphology of the metaphor, an endless commentary on humanity in its aspirations, implications and complications. At its most conventional, the genre is worked as being a formalist catalogue of mythological writings that organically and historically form the growth of the genre. It is such a growth that critically lays down the notions of origins (from Mary Shelley to Transylvania to Witchcraft); actors (from Karloff and Lugosi to Cushing and Lee); auteurs (from Roger Corman to Terence Fisher); and sub-genres (Vampires, Created Life Forms, Ghosts, Mummies, Zombies, Monsters, Aliens, Demons Werewolves, etc).

It is not so much that the modern Horror film refutes or ignores the conventions of genre, but it is involved in a violent awareness of itself as a saturated genre. Its rebirth as such is qualified by *how* it states itself as genre. The historical blue-prints have faded, and the new (post-1975) films recklessly copy and re-draw their generic sketching. In this wild tracing, there are two major areas that affect the modern Horror film: (i) the growth of special effects with cinematic realism and sophisticated technology, and (ii) an historical over-exposure of the genre's iconography, mechanics and effects. The textuality of the modern horror film is integrally and intricately bound up in the dilemma of a saturated fiction whose primary aim in its telling is to generate suspense, shock and horror. It is a mode of fiction, a type of writing that in the fullest sense 'plays' with its reader, engaging the reader in a dialogue of textual manipulation that has no time for the critical ordinances of social realism, cultural enlightenment or emotional humanism. The gratification of the contemporary Horror film is based upon tension, fear, anxiety, sadism and masochism—a disposition that is overall both tasteless and morbid. The pleasure of the text is, in fact, getting the shit scared out of you—and loving it; an exchange mediated by adrenalin.

'Horrorality' involves the construction, deployment and manipulation of horror—in all its various guises—as a textual mode. The effect of its fiction is not unlike a death-defying carnival ride: the subject is a willing target that both constructs the terror and is terrorised by its construction. 'Horrorality' is too blunt to bother with psychology—traditionally the voice of articulation behind horror—because what is of prime importance is the textual effect, the game that one plays *with* the text, a game that is impervious to any knowledge of its workings. The contemporary Horror film *knows* that you've seen it before; it *knows* that you know what is about to happen; and it knows that you know it knows you know. And none of it means a thing, as the cheapest trick in the book will still tense your muscles, quicken your heart and jangle your nerves. It is the *present*—the precise point of speech, of utterance, of plot, of event—that is ever of any value. Its effect disappears with the gulping breath, the gasping shriek, swallowed up by the fascistic continuum of the fiction. A nervous giggle of amoral delight as you prepare yourself in a totally self-deluding way for the next shock. Too late. Freeze. Crunch. Chill. Scream. Laugh.

THE EFFECT

When the 'R' certificate was first introduced to Australia, one particular movie that was strongly linked to the titillation caused by this moralistic parental censorship was *The Exorcist* (1973). Swamped with gore, it was what has now come to be the ultimate Drive-In movie: an opiate of adrenalin. Historically, its controversy was, among other things, due to it being one of the first instances of the whole family being subjected to graphic gore, unadulterated horror and fantastic violence. But none of it was gratuitous. *The Exorcist* was a tale of Catholic moralism (Good vs. Evil) that utilised state-of-the-art gore techniques to produce a work which thrust its audience into a vertigo of realism—the real of its depiction and the real of its fiction. It was a film that was culturally situated in a time when demonic possession was one of those mysteries that threatened the social parameters of the real, of the truthful. One entered into the cinema not for a fiction, but for a direction on that particular social debate. One left confused by the initial vertigo, a two-pronged dilemma—not only 'how did they do *that*?' but 'do such things exist?' The fiction undercut itself, impregnating its effect with plausible existence.



The Exorcist, 1973: a vertigo of social and cinematic realism.

In 1980, *The Amityville Horror* was released. It ironically (but dumbly) copied the currency of *The Exorcist* but went one step further: where *The Exorcist* was founded on a plausibility mediated by our (inherently religious) fears, *The Amityville Horror* purported to be a dramatisation of an actual event. This time, yes: it really did happen. Still, the film was as interesting as the News, a type of telling that performs a journalistic dance around its factual base, creating a dull gap between fiction and fact, neither one nor the other. *The Amityville*

Horror occupied such a space, devoid of any perversity in its telling and full of golly-gosh realism.

Some years after, the whole thing was proved a fraud – and out came *Amityville 2: The Possession* (1982). To counter both *The Exorcist* and *The Amityville Horror*, *Amityville 2* revelled in itself as fiction and went all out to make a horror movie, marking a commercial peak in a growing trend in Horror films, namely the destruction of the Family. Whereas suspense was traditionally hinged on individual identification (the victim, the possessed, the pursued, etc), it was now shifted onto not a family identification, but a pleasure in witnessing the Family being destroyed – it being the object of the horror and us being the subject of their demise. *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977) clearly delineated this by positing two totally opposite families against one another in a battle of horror and fight for survival. An all-white all-blond middle-class American family (mom, dad, two teenage kids, grandma, elder brother and his wife) set out on a camper holiday in the mid-west desert. While camped, they encounter an inbred family of cannibals (papa, mamma, son, daughter, grandma and other animals) who kill off the ‘white bread’ family (director Wes Craven’s description) one by one in the most gory ways possible. While *The Hills Have Eyes* is an unabashed horror-comedy, *Amityville 2* situates its horror in a social-realist frame, making it like *The Exorcist* meets *Ordinary People*. Continually the family in *Amityville 2* is pictorially framed within the screen frame – through doors, by windows, in mirrors, on tables – forever reinforcing the Family as a pathetic polaroid of complacency, ripe for the total destruction that eventually befalls it. At the film’s end, the fully possessed son methodically shoots all the members of the family. A strange suspense is generated here: not only is one wondering ‘is he or she going to get it?’ but also ‘how far is this movie going to go?’ The film takes pleasure in

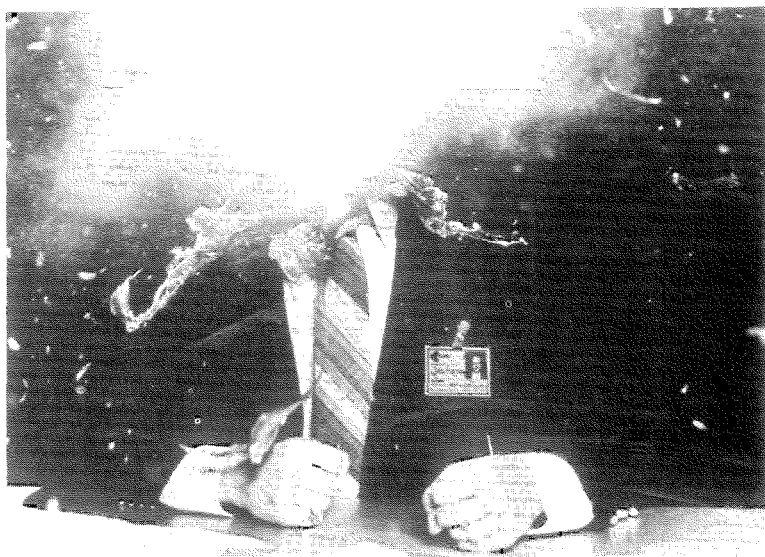


The Hills Have Eyes, 1977: delight in the whole family's destruction.

actually killing off *everybody*. Hitchcock once regretted having the young boy with the bomb parcel blow himself up on a packed double-decker bus in *Sabotage* (1936) because the audience (then) was not relieved of the tension created in wondering whether the boy would survive. *Amityville 2*—like most contemporary Horror films—has no such regrets.

Perhaps what has been an even more prolific trend is the destruction of the Body. The contemporary Horror film tends to play not so much on the broad fear of Death, but more precisely on the fear of one's own body, of how one controls and relates to it. In 1976, an Italian movie *Deep Red* made an impact not by portraying graphic violence—a trademark of Hershal Gordon Lewis in the '60s with films like *Blood Feast*, *Color Me Blood Red* and *She Devils on Wheels*—but by conveying to the viewer a graphic sense of physicality, accentuating the very presence of the body on the screen, e.g. scenes where a person gets rammed into a marble slab, mouth wide open in a scream, crushing the teeth on impact. *Deep Red* is cinematic scraping of chalk on a blackboard. Suspense is set up by knowing that the next scene of violence is going to be uncomfortably physical, due to the graphic feel effected by a very exact and acute cinematic construction of sound, image, framing and editing. But the contemporary Horror film often discards the sophistication of such a traditionally well-crafted handling of cinematic language. *Deep Red* in fact functions as a mid-way point between the Hitchcock debt (carried on by De Palma and Carpenter) and the Lewis debt (carried on by the likes of Paul Morrissey, John Waters, Steve Cuninghame, Tobe Hooper and Sam Raimi), incorporating a mode that both 'tells' you the horror and 'shows' it.

It is this mode of *showing* as opposed to *telling* that is strongly connected to the destruction of the Body. David Cronenberg has consolidated himself as a director who almost exclusively works in this field, with films about an artificially created sex-parasite that transfers itself from body to body during intercourse, causing a wild sex epidemic (*Shivers*, 1976); a mutant cancer growth resultant from a plastic surgery experiment (*Rabid*, 1977); the birth of a mutant brood by a psychologically unstable mother receiving treatment by a special psychiatrist who promotes the physicalisation of his patients' problems *through* their bodies (*The Brood*, 1979); and the awesome physical power that the mind has over its own body and other bodies through parapsychology (*Scanners*, 1981). *Scanners*, alone, could rest as the penultimate Body movie, with an opening shot where a 'scanner'—through the pure power of thought—blows another scanner's head apart. And you see it happen. The *ending* of the movie is something that defies literary description. The horror for such films' subjects is the matter-of-fact nature of the films' plots, as they are slight twists on the fear of getting cancer or even rabies itself. *Scanners* goes further and incorporates a fear of what amounts to mental mugging, translating the liberal fear of having someone read your mind into someone exploding your head through reading your mind.



Scanners, 1981: mind-blowing telepathy.

Ironically, one of the original exploding-head scenes appeared in Brian de Palma's *The Fury* (1978) to which *Scanners* perhaps owes a debt due to both movies dealing with thought-reading more as a *physical* phenomenon than a spiritual, ethereal experience. The difference between the two films is the incredible sense of theatre used in *The Fury*; dramatic intercutting between a man violently shaking and a slow zoom in on the girl with the incredible power of ultra-parapsychology is coupled with an equally dramatic orchestral score, bellowing out its crescendo. Cut. Kaboom! Right on cue as the tonality of the symphony resolves itself, the whole body of the man explodes. A true opera of violence, the ending is a stirring cathartic experience that is emotionally charged by its classical construction. On the other hand, the end scene of *Scanners* is *photographic*. It, too, has cuts, pans and zooms coupled with an appropriately physical soundtrack of synthesised music, but it centres on what is more of a transition period of the physique: a metamorphosis of the body. Veins ripple up the arm, eyes turn white and pop out, hair stands on end, blood trickles from all facial cavities, heads swell and contract. *An American Werewolf in London* (1981) (despite it being a black comedy that uses its *comedy* to effect the audience more than its horror) employs the same photographic sensibility to actually show you the transition from Man to Werewolf in *real time*, as opposed to the ellipse-time of the dissolves of Lon Chaney Jr's face with different stages of make-up to signify his mutation. It's not unlike being on a tram and somebody has an epileptic fit – you're there right next to the person, you can't get away and you can't do anything. *The Beast Within* (1982) sets the stage for such an event as the boy undergoes an agonising transformation on his hospital bed, where a mutated cicada-like creature erupts *out* of his body, in full view of his mother, 'presumed' father, a doctor, and us. The

An American Werewolf in London, 1981: a transition to monstrosity in real time.



doctor exclaims 'My God!' (*the* catch-phrase of the modern horror film) and the mother cries 'My Son!?' The boy not only goes through a transformation, but his body is discarded, shed to make way for the 'beast' within. The horror is conveyed through torture and agony of havoc wrought upon a body devoid of control. The identification is then levelled at that loss of control – the fictional body is as helpless as its viewing subject.

The Thing (1982) took to its logical limit the Body-horror that was initiated in *Alien* (1979) with that infamous scene where the alien bursts out of a crew member's stomach. Both films deal with the notion of an alien purely as a biological life force, whose blind motivation for survival is its only existence. Not just a parasite but a total consumer of *any* life form, a biological black-hole. Each film nonetheless generates a different mode of suspense with a similar form of horror. John Carpenter's graphically 'realistic' suspense horror is a world away from Howard Hawks' B-Grade classic, showing *everything* that the original only alluded to. The essential horror of *The Thing* was in the Thing's total disregard for and ignorance of the human body. To it, the human body is merely protein – no more. A central scene in the film is when the doctor attempts to revive what is presumed a dead officer but which is in fact the Thing in a dormant phase. The doctor goes to push on the officer's chest but his hands go crashing through the chest like an egg-shell, getting his hands torn off by the Thing's 'jaws' within the chest. The awakened Thing then mobilises the dead body, sprouting tentacles through its flesh and limbs through its muscles in an orgy of gore. But what must be remembered is that the 'original' person has actually died, so that pain and agony is *absent*. Stan Brakhage's underground art film

The Act of Seeing with One's Eyes (1973) deals with a similar effect. Silent and lasting only about 20 minutes, all the footage is shot in a morgue, detailing every method that is used in autopsies in full view for the camera. Lacking any conventional narrative structure, the film starts and ends, a blur of flesh, bone, muscle and tissue that presents the human body in every way except its recognisable forms. Both in terms of its subject matter and its fictional structure, *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes* does not recognise the human body. Likewise, *The Thing* does not honour any of our beliefs or perceptions of what the human body is.

The Thing is a violently self-conscious movie. In the aforementioned central scene, the biological nightmare that explodes on the doctor's table is shot down in flames – a difficult task as *any* part of the Thing is a whole lifeform by itself. After all the flesh, blood and guts has been incinerated, the head officer's head lying underneath the table is latched onto by a small bloody tentacle. In what is perhaps the single most technically stunning scene in special effects, the tentacle lashes out of the head onto a door, and drags itself on its side. Just as it reaches the doorway, the crew see it and are transfixed by it. The head slowly turns upside down and, suddenly, eight insect-like legs rip through the head using it like a body. The sight is of an upside-down severed human head out of which have grown insect feet. As it 'walks' out the door, a crew member says *the* line of the film: 'You've got to be fucking kidding!' Quite obviously, this exclamation operates as a two-fold commentary – (i) the scene portrays the lack of limits that the Thing has in its emasculation of the human body; and (ii) the scene presents to the audience the mind-boggling state that special-effects make-up is in at the moment. Later, the film then presents its most physically effective scene: in *extreme* close-up, a thumb is slit by a razor for a blood sample. The audience might gasp and scream in the other scene, but in this scene, one's body is queasily affected not by fear or horror, but by the precision that the photographic image is able to exact upon us. *The Thing* perversely plays with these extensions of cinematic realism, presenting them as a dumbfounding magical spectacle in total knowledge of the irreducible effect that is generated by their manipulation.

The contemporary Horror film in general plays with the contradiction that it is only a movie, but nonetheless a movie that can work upon its audience with immediate results. As such, it is only the result that counts. A film like *Ghost Story* (1982) even names itself – its design and function – in its very title. Within the fiction, four old men form a 'chowder society' as a regular social occasion to tell each other stories for the sole purpose of scaring one another. Out of this unfolds the central story, which is designed to scare the viewer. All stories engulf one another in a whirlpool of fright generated by the act of telling. The opening of *The Fog* (1980) sets a similarly quaint scene: an old fisherman is camped out on the beach at night with a group of kids aged between seven and ten, their awe-filled faces lit by the flickering camp fire. In this Norman Rockwell setting, the fisherman tells the local folklore tale about the curse put on the town by pirates who were killed by the

prominent townsfolk a hundred years ago to the day. On come the film's credits, and then the movie starts—which is the story about what the curse originally promised, the revenge of the pirates. The introductory scene is dense in stereotypography. But rather than smash the cliché or undermine it, it is totally played out and fully lived. The contemporary Horror film rarely denies its clichés, but instead accepts them, often causing an undercurrent by overplaying them.

Another twist on the emphasis of the tale as a basic narrative form for the Horror film is the cinematic realisation of the textual organisation of the comic book. The most famous of Horror comics were the E.C. comics from the early 1950s, the style and form of which have influenced the contemporary Horror film to a large degree. Although Hammer Horror films were mainly derived from gothic literature and imagery, the 1971 film *The Abominable Doctor Phibes* is perhaps the first cinematic version of an E.C. comic. Amounting to not much more than a speedy revenge tale full of truly inventive and gory deaths, *The Abominable Doctor Phibes* combines the macabre with the hilarious in a way that was picked up in Milton Subotsky's Amicus films *Tales from the Crypt* (1972), and *Vault of Horror* (1973) and carried on in the outlandish Paul Morrissey films *Blood for Dracula* and *Flesh for Frankenstein* (both made in 1974), culminating in George Romero's exacting homage to E.C., *Creepshow* (1983). *Creepshow* in particular is notable not only for how it puts cinematic language at the service of the comic-strip (the reverse is usually the case in nearly all comic adaptations) but also for the incredible variation in tone of each of the five stories, ranging from the farcical to the horrific.

Still, it is humour that remains one of the major features of the contemporary Horror film, especially if used as an undercutting agent to counter-balance its more horrific moments. The humour is not usually well-crafted but mostly perverse and/or tasteless, so much so that often the humour might be horrific while the horror might be humorous. Furthermore, the joke or punchline is imbedded in the film text and does not function separate from the film. As such, the humour in a gory scene is the result of the contemporary Horror film's saturation of all its codes and conventions—a punchline that can only be got when one fully acknowledges this saturation as the departure point for viewing pleasure. The film that most clearly illustrates this is *The Evil Dead* (1982) which is a gore movie beyond belief that has one simultaneously screaming with terror and laughter (as opposed to the jarring effect attempted in *American Werewolf in London*). After almost deliberately setting itself up as a boring cheap horror flick, it suddenly pulls out all the stops when a possessed girl thrusts a sharp lead pencil into the ankle of a girl and swirls it around making mince meat out of her ankle—in real time and full close-up. A similar effect is used in the now seminal (though not as funny as *The Evil Dead*) *Friday the 13th* where the girl who appears to be the main star suddenly gets her throat slit in a totally non-eventful way, causing a dull thud with its awkward and messy depiction of her death.



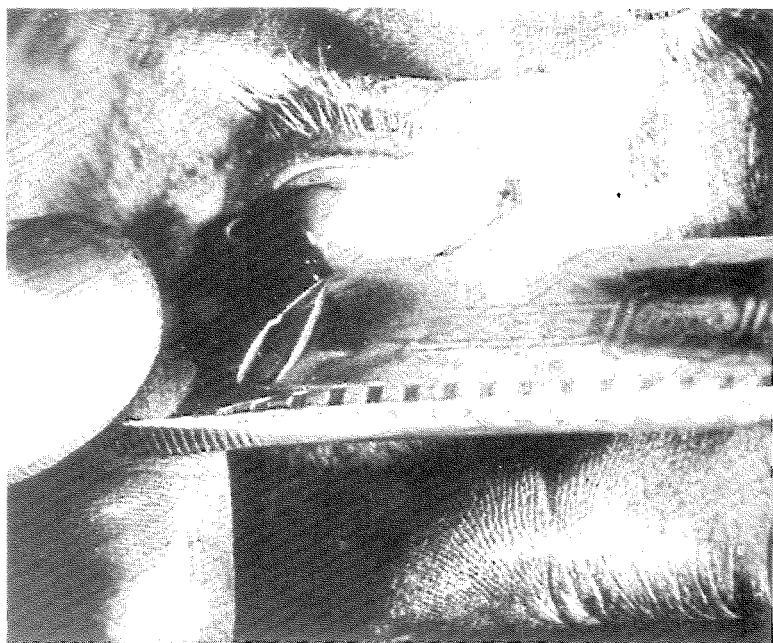
The Evil Dead, 1982:
simultaneous terror
and laughter.

And I could go on—having not yet even mentioned the classical construction of *Alien* (the most flawless suspense text I've yet encountered); the meeting of a Disneyland sentimentality with traditional avant-garde technical experimentation in *Poltergeist* (1982), or the Slasher sub-genre initiated most forcibly by *Halloween*. But the contemporary Horror film is always changing as each new film sets new precedents and new commentaries on special effects, plot, realism, horror, suspense, humour and subject matter, which effect whatever films are to follow. 'Horrality' is thus a mode of textuality that is dictated by trends within both the Horror genre and cinematic realism. But what amounts to an awkward problematic in analysis and writing in fact works very productively in the viewing of the films, and it is at this point in film history that one is able to experience the speed of this genre about genre.

This article is reprinted by kind permission of the Australian journal *Art & Text* in whose Spring 1983 issue it originally appeared.

VILE BODIES AND BAD MEDICINE

BY PETE BOSS



The body mutilated:
above, *Un Chien
Andalou*, 1929.

Perhaps if one were to cut out a heart, a lobe of the liver, a single convolution of the brain, and put it on a page, it would speak with more eloquence than all the words of Balzac. Such a piece would need no literary style.

— Richard Selzer, *Confessions Of A Knife*¹

THE CONTEMPORARY CINEMA displays a considerable range of images informed by popular attitudes towards modern medicine and related areas. Surgery, terminal illness, organ transplants and biomedical research are topics which are regularly and eagerly exploited for their potentially disturbing values, providing material for single instances of graphic gore on the one hand, or entire plots on the other. Since this article takes a sufficiently broad view of the subject to

¹ Reading,
Triad/Granada, 1982,
p 9.

include black comedy like *The Hospital* (1971), sci-fi horror – *Forbidden World* (1984) – and thrillers – *Coma* (1978) – and would extend to sequences such as the notorious dentist's chair torture in *Marathon Man* (1976), the following remarks are not intended to establish yet another theory of the horror film *per se*. Rather, they seek to offer a tentative exploration of what appear, sometimes, to be generically diverse phenomena chosen for their shared articulation of what would appear to be a peculiarly post-modern sense of dread, many of the most fully-realised instances of which are to be found in the horror film.

Of course there have been numerous examples in the past of mutilated bodies and mad doctors: the eyeball slitting of *Un Chien Andalou* (1929) and the flayed faces of *Eyes without a Face* (1959), as well as the two Frankenstein cycles of Universal and Hammer with their emphasis upon the manipulation of human flesh. A different tone and subjectivity prevails in contemporary films, however: the sensational acts of Frankenstein's 'workshop of filthy creation' – the twisted bodily figurations of Promethean guilt – and the gothic legacy have given way to matter-of-fact and routine instances of physical helplessness, frequently at the hands, or rather the tools, of some brightly-lit and hygienic publicly-funded institution. This tendency is, to a greater or lesser extent, reliant upon several interacting cultural conditions: the contemporary horror film's unquestionable obsession with the physical constitution and destruction of the human body; a paranoid or conspiracist tendency in social and political thinking; and a complex of negative images which inform popular attempts to address the problems of death and of dying – especially insofar as they are subject to the influence of medical technology and institutional bureaucracy.

Elsewhere in this issue Philip Brophy defines the textuality of the modern horror film in terms of a playing '... precisely on the fear of one's own body, of how one controls and relates to it'. As he goes on to point out, such is the strength of the impulse to rehearse the loss of this control through cleverly contrived instances of gory special effects that the coherence of accepted patterns of film language is frequently relegated to a position subordinate to the demands of presenting the viewer with the uncompromised or privileged detail of human carnage. The accurate reconstruction of anatomical detail is a major industry which has provided a new generation of effects men, or special make-up artists as they are often described, with busy and lucrative careers. Artists like Tom Savini (*Zombies: Dawn of the Dead*, 1977), Rick Baker (*Thriller*, 1983), Dick Smith (*The Exorcist*, 1973) and Rob Bottin (*The Thing*, 1982) are the subjects of lengthy articles and interviews in fanzines like *Fangoria*, *Cinefantastique*, *SFX* and *Starlog*; whole books in some instances. Their speciality is the lifelike creation of human tissue in torment, of the body in profuse disarray. Clearly it is the case that most viewers, irrespective of educational background, are unlikely to possess sufficient knowledge of the human body to ascertain the anatomical accuracy of the various nerves, muscles, arteries, sinews and so forth. What seems to be more important is that they are recognisable signifiers

of the subject's demonstrable physical limitations, being indicative not of a widespread interest in human physiology but of a closing-off or reduction of identity to its corporal horizons. A concern with the self as body.

For death in the contemporary horror film to occur offscreen would be almost unthinkable, it would miss the point. The villain in an Audie Murphy western may suffer an apparently bloodless death, since the problem is the victory of Right over Wrong and his demise is its token. Even the copious bloodletting of a representative Hammer product such as *Dracula Has Risen from the Grave* (1968) relies more upon the punishment of the body as a way of figuring punishment for moral and sexual transgression, emphasising, in scenes of physical assault, the violence of its execution. The assertiveness of these acts, then, is what emerges in the loss of blood or tissue; the emphasis is one of quantity rather than quality. Now that time has divested films like *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *The Wild Bunch* (1969) of their scandalous qualities it becomes similarly clear that their most sensational acts of violence lay small claim to verisimilitude and are bound up with problems of action and desire. Their disturbing quality remains due to the way the spectator is caught and implicated in the production of these problems.

The bodily destruction of the modern horror film is, by contrast, often casual to the point of randomness; devoid of metaphysical import, it is frequently squalid, incidental to the main action, mechanically routine in its execution and lonely but for the unwavering scrutiny of the lens as it seeks out details of broken bodies. This concern with accuracy has emerged through a steadily accumulating repertoire of scenes in the general cinema which shock by their revelations of detailed physical injuries: the close-up of Snowden's entrails in *Catch-22* (1970), the bone protruding from Burt Reynolds' leg in *Deliverance* (1972), the chewed and waterlogged pieces of body inspected so thoroughly in *Jaws* (1975) Often these scenes of carnage are presented in a privileged but wholly detached manner. Freed from interest in character we watch Marilyn Chambers' skin graft in *Rabid* (1977) with the detached eye of a surgeon as strips of flesh are peeled away by some kind of electric slicer. It is her flesh which fascinates and appalls us rather than the character's plight - she is reduced to mere tissue. Contemporary horror fiction often operates with a similar detachment - Stuart Kinder's *The Institute*, Raymond Hawkey's *Side-Effect* or Robin Cook's novels *Coma* and *Brain*, for instance.² Here is a striking example from *Brain* describing a murder:

*The knife blade plunged down just behind the right clavicle at the base of the neck, slicing through the upper lobe of the lung before piercing the right pulmonary artery. Blood poured into the open bronchus, causing a reflex agonal cough, which sent the blood hurling from the mouth in a ballistic arc over the top of Philip's head, drenching the table in front of him.*³

The dispassionate tendency in the narration emerges even more clearly here in what seems like pathologists' prose. Since literature needs no

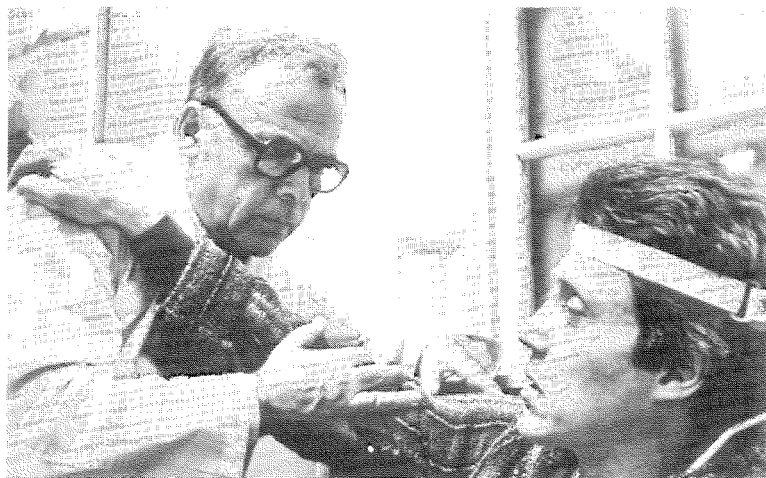
² Robin Cook, *Brain*, London, Pan, 1982.
Robin Cook, *Coma*, London, Pan, 1979.
Raymond Hawkey, *Side-Effect*, London, New English Library, 1980. Stuart Kinder, *The Institute*, London, Granada, 1984.

³ Robin Cook, *Brain*, op cit, pp 185-186.

special effects team it is easier to give accurate detail, but the sheer redundancy of the technical language here is in service to a simple signification of the body as demystified matter. It is not necessary to understand the terms in their own right, only to register their collective import. To quote effects man Tom Savini on his work: 'It produces the effect, even if you don't know the anatomy of: "Yes, that's the way it looks."'"

While we may have abolished God, Good and Evil as significant influences on our lives, we have so far failed to abolish Fear. Materialism, what William Faulkner presciently termed a 'national religion of the entrails', produces its own brand of Manicheanism where health and sickness, order and chaos, compete in the body. On the one hand there is the attention paid to issues of physical fitness, jogging, aerobics, etc. On the other looms the spectre of cancer. In cinematic terms one might postulate *Fame* (1980) and *Flashdance* (1983) against the films directed by David Cronenberg, the physical energy of the former against the drained performance of Christopher Walken in *The Dead Zone* (1983)—the hero as terminal case. The image of cancer runs throughout the present cycle of horror films, either explicitly as in Cronenberg's tumour-conscious films or *Forbidden World*, or implicitly represented in the numerous cases of uncontrollable tissue growth or incubi as can be found in *Alien* (1979), *The Thing* or *Mutant II* (1985). What is common is the sense of disaster being visited at the level of the body itself—an intimate apocalypse. The enduring image is of the body irreversibly self-destructing by the actions of inscrutable cellular networks operating in accordance with their own incomprehensible schedules.

In *The Brood* (directed by David Cronenberg, 1979), there is an unsettling scene in which a former patient of a research clinic (Robert Silverman) ceases his frenetic and desperate physical exercises in order to reveal a hideously disfiguring lymphosarcoma which has developed upon his throat. The disclosure is accompanied by the bitterly flippant remark: 'I've got a small revolution on my hands and I'm not putting it



The hero as terminal case: Christopher Walken, right, in *The Dead Zone*, 1983.

The allegorical
zombie film: *Night of
the Living Dead*,
1969.



down very successfully.³ But despite the allegorical values of zombie films such as those directed by George Romero, *Night of the Living Dead* (1969) and *Zombies: Dawn of the Dead*, both of which make attempts to connect their disturbances with particular social conditions such as race, gender and consumerism, it is difficult to integrate readings of political progressivity with the fantasies of physical degradation and vulnerability that I have begun to characterise here. Thus, the kind of analysis proposed by Robin Wood et al in *The American Nightmare*⁴ which has been valuable in providing one inroad into the contemporary horror film – its potential as a site of oppositional values in American culture – tends to become inadequate when it must begin to address the genuinely horrific features of the genre. It is not sufficient to describe the values which threaten American culture as disturbing enough in themselves. For instance: ‘One might say that the true subject of the horror genre is the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization represses or oppresses: its reemergence dramatized, as in our nightmares, as an object of horror, a matter for terror, the “happy ending” (when it exists) typically signifying the restoration of repression.’⁵ This kind of argument, focusing upon the figure of the monster as ‘Other’, leaves the discourse of bodily destruction largely unexamined or taken for granted as somehow determining the extent of the monster’s ‘monstrousness’.

It is the case, however, that these films are in many ways ‘about’ this ruination of the physical subject; the fascination with this spectacle is not in any way a secondary consideration. The interest of the readers of the magazines mentioned already – the ‘respectable’ organs such as *Starlog* – developed through the discourse of special effects, is more urgently revealed in the pages of the cheap broadsheets currently circulating in the US. Reviewing *The New Kids* (1985), *Rick Sullivan’s Gore Gazette* declares that: ‘Impatient gorehounds may criticize the flick for its long build-up to any real bloodletting...’⁶, a statement of priorities which emerges regularly in this kind of journalism. Any account of horror as a genre, or the horrific in general, must come to

⁴ Robin Wood and Richard Lippe (eds), *The American Nightmare*, Toronto, Festival of Festivals, 1979.

⁵ *ibid*, p 10.

⁶ *Rick Sullivan’s Gore Gazette*, no 75, p 3.

terms with this desire.

One way of locating this development might be to situate the films within the wider discursive formations that Michel Foucault has identified as the basis of a new economy of power in society. Briefly, this sees the emergence, outlined most clearly in his work *Discipline and Punish*⁷, of a 'political technology of the body' in which the reproduction of the social formation, crucially relying upon the body as an instrument of production, is in part effected by the constitution of the body as an object as well as a subject, as a knowable quantity for both physical and political regulation:

... it was a question not of treating the body, *en masse*, 'wholesale', as if it were an indissociable unity, but of working it 'retail', individually; of exercising upon it a subtle coercion, of obtaining holds upon it at the level of the mechanism itself—movements, gestures, attitudes, rapidity: an infinitesimal power over the active body.⁸

This process of regulation extended to the purview of modern medicine as medical rationalism allowed a '... period in which illness, counter-nature, death, in short, the whole dark underside of disease came to light, at the same time illuminating and eliminating itself like night, in the deep, visible solid, enclosed but accessible space of the human body.' This recasting of the unknown within the parameters of the human body has led to a powerfully ambivalent sense of the institution of modern medicine. According to Foucault,

... medicine offers man the obstinate, yet reassuring face of his finitude; in it, death is endlessly repeated, but it is also exorcised; and although it ceaselessly reminds man of the limit that it bears within him, it also speaks to him of that technical world that is the armed, positive, full form of his finitude.⁹

Modern medicine, its methods of quantification and treatment, its technology and power, stands, at once, as that which improves or prolongs our (physical) existence, and the constant signifier of its limitations, a condition which allows it to slide rapidly from reassurance to disturbance in its imagery. *Faces of Death* (1981), a film in the *Mondo Cane* (1961) tradition which offers a pseudo-documentary collection of sundry images of human and animal demise (frequently and artlessly faked), gives us a convenient example of the way this tension emerges. The opening sequence is of a man in a hospital bed supposedly enjoying his last few moments alive in a state of unconsciousness. Our attention moves, in the absence of any vital signs, from the patient himself to the screen of the ECG machine and its familiar heart-bleep. The man's deteriorating condition is registering and the machine begins to assume the role of a dispassionate arbiter of life itself. Eventually its signal becomes the familiar continuous tone; the corpse is mocked by the *schadenfreude* of the machine's sheer disinterest. (It is interesting to compare this with a similar scenario in the melodramatic *Dallas* where, during the death of Bobby Ewing, inter-cutting to ECG close-ups

⁷ Michel Foucault, *Discipline And Punish*, Harmondsworth, Peregrine, 1982.

⁸ *ibid*, pp 136-137.

⁹ Michel Foucault, *The Birth Of The Clinic*, London, Tavistock, 1976, p 195.

¹⁰ Philippe Ariès, *The Horror of our Death*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1983, p 614.

functioned more as an index of the anguish of the assembled relatives.)

Despite the immaculate order of the hospital, its brilliance and asepticism, the banishing of the signifiers of death and decay, it remains a sanctuary of contemporary terror. The historian Philippe Ariès has commented: 'it [the hospital experience] . . . has allowed the old savagery to creep back under the mask of medical technology. The death of the patient in the hospital, covered with tubes, is becoming a popular image, more terrifying than the *transi* or skeleton of macabre rhetoric. There seems to be a correlation between the "evacuation" of death, the last refuge of evil, and the return of the same death no longer tame. This should not surprise us. The belief in evil was necessary to the taming of death; the disappearance of the belief has restored death to its savage state.'¹⁰

Through the image of fully institutionalised modern medicine, hospitals, banks of life-support equipment, the inscrutable terminology, the rigid regime and hierarchy, one's own body rendered alien, regulated, labelled, categorised, rearranged, manipulated, scrutinised and dissected, we experience the powerful and pervasive idea of the subject as defenceless matter becoming integrated into a wider frame of reference in which the institutional and organisational aspects of medicine – denuded of bedside manner – focus their conspiratorial attentions upon it. In different ways films such as *Coma*, *Terminal Choice* (1984) and *SS Experiment Camp* offer graphic fantasies of the body subjected to an alien and totalitarian regime. The idea that our bodies can be mismanaged, needlessly interfered with, is a theme common enough for it to have colonised popular humour and gossip. That this cannot happen is the reassuring message which most hospital melodrama of the *Dr Kildare* variety attempts to provide. More and more, though, we are treated to disturbing rather than comforting images. The hospital lends itself perfectly to allegorical visions of social dystopia, forming the basis for black comedy in *The National Health*, (1973), *The*



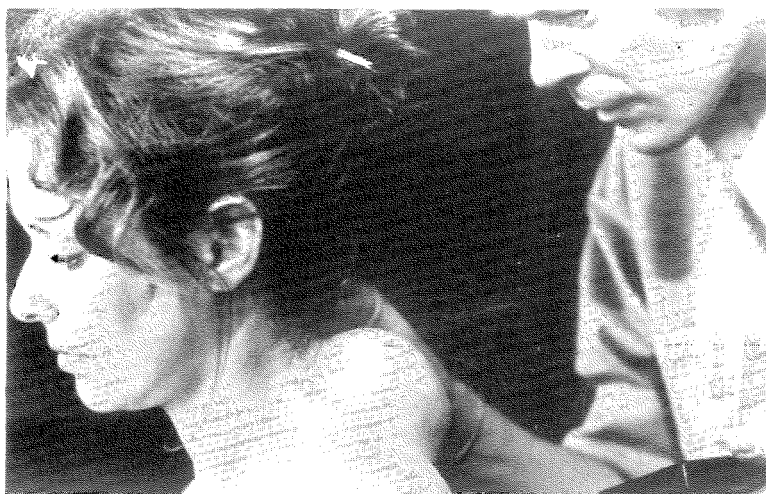
Malpractice: the mental hospital as totalitarian regime in *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, 1975.

Hospital (1971), *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) and *Brittania Hospital* (1982), in all of which inhumanity, malpractice and neglect are established as routine. It requires only a small shift in our credibility for the surgeon to become the slasher of *Blind Date* (1984) and *Visiting Hours* (1981). In the former, a maniac murders while dressed in surgeon's garb, marking the victims' bodies in advance as if performing an operation. The latter involves a psychopath stalking the wards of a hospital, dressed as a doctor and able to strike at whom he pleases. In *Blind Date* we are placed in the position of victim by frequent close-ups of the descending scalpel as viewed from below and on the first occasion a blurred image of an instrument tray gradually comes into focus as if we were the victim/patient regaining consciousness. Distorted patient's-eye-views are common throughout the tendency.

In *The Hospital*, in which Paddy Chayevsky's script diagnoses the great American disease as 'vestigial identity', the level of incompetence falls little short of murder and prompts the chief of medicine, played by George C Scott, to shout at the head nurse: 'My God, where do you train your nurses, Mrs Christie . . . Dachau?' This image is actualised in *SS Experiment Camp*, which depicts a World War II medical experimentation unit run by an SS Kommandant/surgeon. Sexual experiments are conducted using male SS volunteers and women prisoners, the ultimate rationale for which is an intended testicle transplant for the camp's castrated chief. The ludicrous narrative distributes its interests between a literal castration fantasy and repeated instances of torture and death through the agency of a total institution. The victims, mainly women, are subjected to a range of pseudo-experimental apparatus, from temperature-varying devices to compressed air generators, all of which are used as instruments of torture.

This technophobia is clearly apparent in *The Manitou* (1977), which tries and fails to restore our faith in the machine. Karen Tandy (Susan Strasberg) is suffering from a strange lump on her neck which confounds the experts with its massive growth rate and the eventual discovery that it contains some sort of living entity. This turns out to be the latest incarnation of a powerful Native American medicine man. He is in pain due to the preliminary X-Ray photography and when he hatches out he is horribly deformed. In the hospital the Manitou begins to take revenge with magic, calling up various spirits (manitous). The advice of another medicine man proves inadequate until the idea of exploiting the manitou of the hospital computer—all things have these spirits—is successful. Here cancerphobia is combined with topical fears about pre-natal medicine and opposed to the 'natural' suggested by the Native American magic theme. In one scene an attempt to operate on the pregnant growth results in a surgeon being forced to turn his scalpel upon himself while the equipment is sent haywire; the reassuring litany of operating room dialogue and procedural calm are disrupted by primitive magic. Underlying this is the doubt about medicine's ability to perform its role as secular saviour, a suspicion that more arcane forces may be at work. It is this doubt which the film (unlike *The Exorcist*, 1973, for example)

Cancerphobia: *The Manitou*, 1977.



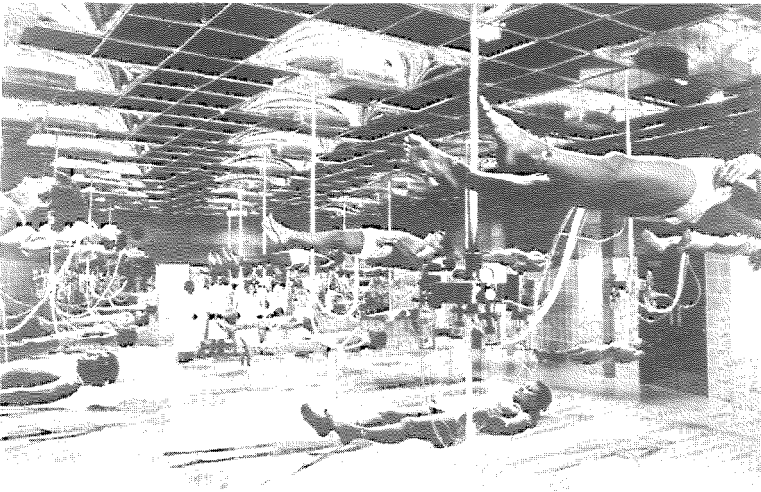
attempts to dispel by exploiting the manitou of the computer. Unable to find a non-metaphysical answer, however, it resolves itself by putting a soul into the machine.

Fear of technological conspiracy runs throughout these films. In *Terminal Choice*, set in a modern hospital where patients are supervised and monitored by computer, patients are murdered by reprogramming of dosages. They die unnoticed as the computer allows only an apparently normal image of the patient to appear at the nurses' station. Similarly, in *Coma*, the latest development in computer-assisted long-term care conceals a human slaughterhouse where victims, healthy until subject to a routine operation which made them comatose, are dissected for transplant organs (an idea pre-figured in *Seconds*, 1966). Both films demonstrate a horror at systems which reduce subjects to objects, people to things. As one character puts it in *Terminal Choice*, 'Yesterday there was this lady I liked named Mary O'Connor. Tonight she's a piece of meat ...'.

Such fictions would appear to draw upon actual medical issues for their raw material; John Sutherland, examining the novel *Coma*, refers to transplant surgery, medicare expenses, iatrogenic illness, malpractice and the problem of legally-defined death, for example, fears about which are 'managed' by the text.¹¹ Yet they also seem to partake in the tradition of symptomatic responses to reified notions of 'technological society'. It may be that they are less the immediate response to such phenomena than they are part of a more general set of discursive practices. Frederick Jameson has characterised contemporary paranoid fiction of this kind as in fact a '... privileged representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control too difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp ... conspiracy theory (and its garish manifestations) must be seen as a degraded attempt – through the figuration of advanced technology – to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system.'¹² For Jameson this is a feature of the post-modern condition, 'in

¹¹ John Sutherland, *Bestsellers: Popular Fiction of the 1970's*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981.

¹² Frederick Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', *New Left Review* no 146, July/August 1984, pp 79-80.



Technophobia:
Coma, 1978.

which the alienation of the subject is displaced by the fragmentation of the subject'. A recurring feature of the numerous attempts to characterise this post-modernity is the notion of a breakdown in the distinction between the subject and an object-world. In the words of Jean Baudrillard, 'There is no longer any system of objects.' The new expanding network of communication systems is one in which the individual can no longer determine limits and in which the symbolic space of the body is retreating. Thus the individual is prey to 'the absolute proximity, the total instantaneity of things, the feeling of no defense, no retreat. It is the end of interiority and intimacy, the overexposure and transparency of the world which traverses him without obstacle. He can no longer produce the limits of his own being, can no longer play nor stage himself, can no longer produce himself as mirror. He is now only a pure screen, a switching centre for all the networks of influence.'¹³

These films develop a notion of human identity with the machine, rather than the classic tension between them. On the one hand, we are given an image of the body as a self-determining system of cells, organs, whatever – operating with mechanistic logic. On the other, it becomes, in the hospital horror films, part of a highly organised network of operations which eventually invade or manipulate subjectivity. Cyborgs – the synthesis of flesh and machine – are similarly evocative in both *The Terminator* (1984) and *Blade Runner* (1982), in which the problem of distinction and the critique of the 'cogito' is central. Cinematic discourse frequently attempts to effect this blurring of man/machine. In *Terminal Choice* large amounts of screen time are given to slow close-up tracking shots which progress along the rows of machines, pipes and bottles until they are seen to feed into the patient – part of one large system run by computer. Meanwhile the soundtrack mixes together the sounds of fluids, electronics, heartbeats, relays and breathing into one; amalgamating the aural rhythms of body and machine. It is tempting to see the special effects fascination as contributing to this same discourse: that the

¹³ Jean Baudrillard, 'The Ecstasy Of Communication', in Hal Foster (ed), *Postmodern Culture*, London, Pluto, 1985, p 135.

process is one of producing not the total illusion of people in torment – for it is only through awareness of their artifice that we can appreciate them as effects – but of constructing lifelike human simulacra. To cite Baudrillard once more, ‘Something has changed, and the Faustian, Promethean (perhaps Oedipal) period of production and consumption gives way to the proteinic era of connections, contact, contiguity, feedback and generalized interface that goes with the universe of communication.’¹⁴ The categories of Otherness which traditionally functioned in the horror film are no longer adequate – comparing Hawks’ 1951 version with Carpenter’s 1982 version of *The Thing* instantly underlines this – and the Frankenstein monster of the present is difficult to distinguish from its creator.



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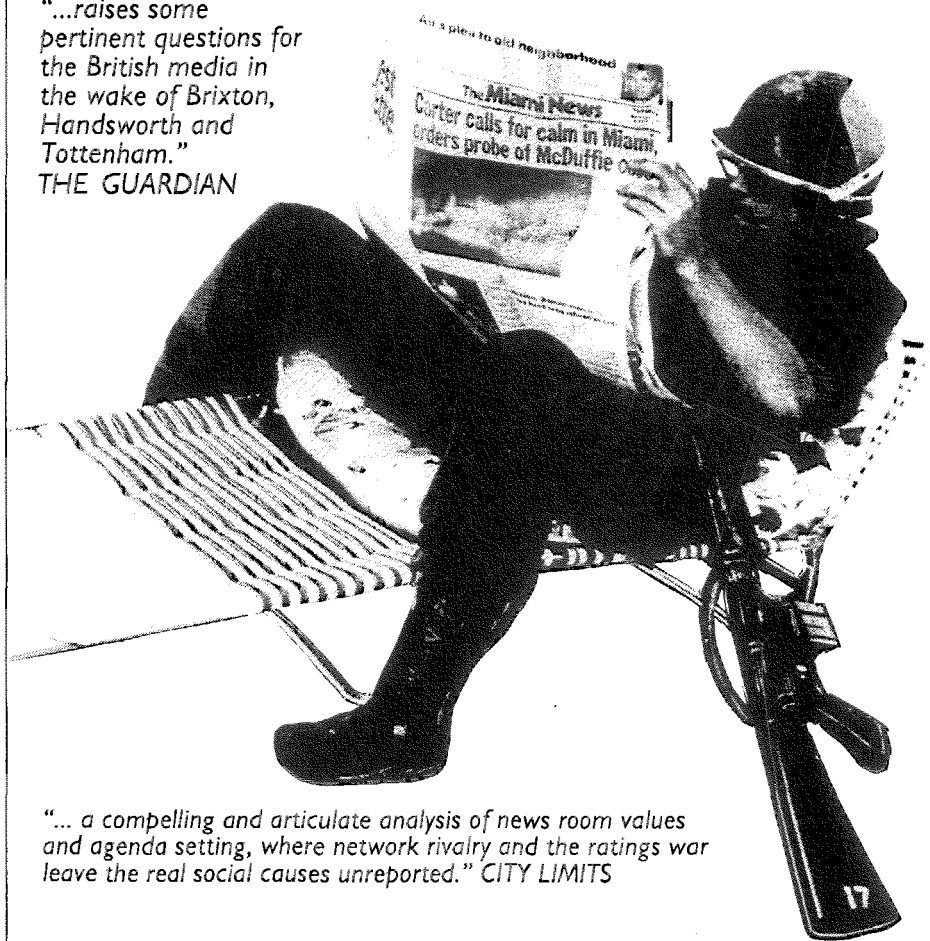
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BY DAVID SHULMAN

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MONSTER METAPHORS: NOTES ON MICHAEL JACKSON'S 'THRILLER'

BY KOBENA MERCER

MICHAEL JACKSON, MEGASTAR. His LP, *Thriller*, made over three years ago in 1982, has sold over 35 million copies worldwide and is said to be the biggest selling LP in the history of pop. Jackson is reputed to have amassed a personal fortune of some 75 million dollars at the age of 26. Even more remarkably, he's been a star since he was 11 and sang lead with his brothers in the Jackson Five, the biggest selling group on the Tamla Motown label in the '70s. The Jackson Five practically invented the genre of 'teeny-bopper' pop cashed in upon by white pop idols like Donny Osmond. While such figures have faded from memory, classic Jackson Five tunes like 'I Want You Back' and 'ABC' can still evoke the pride and enthusiasm which marked the assertive mood of the 'Black Pride' cultural movement.

After he and his brothers left Motown in the mid-'70s and took more artistic control over their own productions, Jackson developed as a singer, writer and stage performer. His *Off The Wall* LP of 1979, which established him as a solo star, demonstrates the lithe, sensual texture of his voice and its mastery over a diverse range of musical styles and

idioms, from romantic ballad to rock. Just what is it that makes this young, black man so different, so appealing?

Undoubtedly, it is the voice which lies at the heart of his appeal. Rooted in the Afro-American tradition of 'soul', Jackson's vocal performance is characterised by breathy gasps, squeaks, sensual sighs and other wordless sounds which have become his stylistic signature. The way in which this style punctuates the emotional resonance and bodily sensuality of the music corresponds to what Roland Barthes called the 'grain' of the voice – 'the grain is the body in the voice as it sings'.¹ The emotional and erotic expressiveness of the voice is complemented by the sensual grace and sheer excitement of Jackson's dancing style: even as a child, his stage performance provoked comparisons with James Brown and Jackie Wilson.

But there is another element to Jackson's success and popularity – his image. Jackson's individual style fascinates and attracts attention. The ankle-cut jeans, the single-gloved hand and, above all, the wet-look hairstyle which have become his trademarks, have influenced the sartorial repertoires of black and white youth cultures and been incorporated into mainstream fashion.

Most striking is the change in Jackson's looks and physical appearance as he has grown. The cute child dressed in gaudy flower power gear and sporting a huge 'Afro' hairstyle has become, as a young adult, a paragon of racial and sexual ambiguity. Michael reclines across the gatefold sleeve of the *Thriller* LP, dressed in crisp black and white on a glossy metallic surface against a demure pink background. Look closer – the glossy sheen of his complexion appears lighter in colour than before; the nose seems sharper, more aqualine, less rounded and 'African' and the

¹ Roland Barthes, 'The Grain of the Voice', in Stephen Heath (ed), *Image-Music-Text*, London, Fontana, 1977, p. 188.



The metamorphosis of Michael Jackson: the racial and sexual ambiguity of the *Thriller* sleeve succeeds the Afro-haired child

lips seem tighter, less pronounced. Above all, the large 'Afro' has dissolved into a shock of wet-look permed curls and a new stylistic trademark, the single lock over the forehead, appears.

What makes this reconstruction of Jackson's image more intriguing is the mythology built up around it, in which it is impossible or simply beside the point to distinguish truth from falsehood. It is said that he has undergone cosmetic surgery to adopt a more white, European look, although Jackson denies it.² But the definite sense of racial ambiguity writ large in his new image is at the same time, and by the same token, the site of a sexual ambiguity bordering on androgyny. He may sing as sweet as Al Green, dance as hard as James Brown, but he looks more like Diana Ross than any black male soul artist. The media have seized upon these ambiguities and have fabricated a 'persona', a private 'self' behind the image, which has become the subject of speculation and rumour. This mythologisation has culminated in the construction of a Peter Pan figure. We are told that behind the star's image is a lonely, 'lost boy', whose life is shadowed by morbid obsessions and anxieties. He lives like a recluse and is said to 'come alive' only when he is on stage in front of his fans. The media's exploitation of public fascination with Jackson the celebrity has even reached the point of 'pathologising' his personality:

Even Michael Jackson's millions of fans find his lifestyle strange. It's just like one of his hit songs, Off The Wall. People in the know say—His biggest thrill is taking trips to Disneyland. His closest friends are zoo animals. He talks to tailor's dummies in his lounge. He fasts every Sunday and then dances in his bedroom until he drops of exhaustion. So showbusiness folk keep asking the question: 'Is Jacko Wacko?' Two top American psychiatrists have spent hours examining a detailed dossier on Jackson. Here is their on-the-couch report.³

Jackson's sexuality and sexual preference in particular have been the focus for such public fascination, as a business associate of his, Shirley Brooks, complains:

He doesn't and won't make public statements about his sex life, because he believes—and he is right—that is none of anyone else's business. Michael and I had a long conversation about it, and he felt that anytime you're in the public eye and don't talk to the press, they tend to make up these rumours to fill their pages.⁴

² Robert Johnson, 'The Michael Jackson Nobody Knows', *Ebony* (USA), December 1984.

³ *The Sun*, April 9, 1984.

⁴ Quoted in Nelson George, *The Michael Jackson Story*, London, New English Library, 1984, p. 106.

Neither child nor man, not clearly either black or white and with an androgynous image that is neither masculine nor feminine, Jackson's

star-image is a 'social hieroglyph', as Marx said of the commodity form, which demands, yet defies, decoding. This article offers a reading of the music video *Thriller* from the point of view of the questions raised by the phenomenal popularity of this star, whose image is a spectacle of racial and sexual indeterminacy.

Remake, Remodel: Video in the Marketing of Thriller

In recent years the 'new', hybrid medium of music video has come to occupy a central importance in the sale and significance of pop music. As 'adverts' to promote records, pop videos are now prerequisites to break singles into the charts. As industrial product, the medium – institutionalised in America's cable network MTV, owned by Warner Communications and American Express – has revitalised the economic profitability of pop by capitalising on new patterns of consumption created by the use, on a mass scale, of video technology.⁵ From its inception, however, MTV maintained an unspoken policy of excluding black artists. Jackson's videos for singles from the *Thriller* LP were the first to penetrate this racial boundary.

The videos for two songs from that LP, 'Billy Jean' and 'Beat It' stand out in the way they foreground Jackson's new style. 'Billy Jean', directed by Steve Barron, visualises the 'cinematic' feel of the music track and its narrative of a false paternity claim, by creating through a 'studio-set' scenario, sharp editing and various effects an ambience that complements rather than illustrates the song. Taking its cue from the LP cover, it stresses Jackson's style in his dress and in his dance. Paving stones light up as Jackson twists, kicks and turns through the performance, invoking the 'magic' of the star. 'Beat It', directed by Bob Giraldi (who made TV adverts for MacDonald's hamburgers and Dr Pepper soft drinks) visualises the anti-macho lyric of the song. Shots alternate between 'juvenile delinquent' gangs about to begin a fight, and Michael, fragile and alone in his bedroom. The singer then disarms the gangs with superior charm and grace as he leads the all-male cast through a dance sequence that synthesises the cinematic imagery of *The Warriors* and *West Side Story*.

These videos, executed from designs by Jackson himself, and others in which he appears such as 'Say, Say, Say' by Paul McCartney and 'Can You Feel It' by The Jacksons, are important aspects of the commercial success of *Thriller* because they breached the boundaries of race, on which the music industry has been based. Unlike stars such as Lionel Richie, Jackson has not 'crossed over' from black to white stations to end up in the middle of the road: his success has popularised black music in white rock and pop markets, by actually playing with imagery and style which have always been central to the marketing of pop. In so doing, Jackson has opened up a space in which new stars like Prince are operating, at the interface between the boundaries defined by 'race'.

⁵ On music video see Michael Boodro, 'Rock Videos: Another World', *ZG* ('Breakdown' issue), London 1984; Dessa Fox, 'The Video Virus', *New Musical Express*, May 4, 1985; Dave Laing, 'Music-Video: Industrial Product – Cultural Form', *Screen*, March/April 1985, vol 26 no 2, pp 78-83, and Andy Lipman, 'The World of Salvador Disney', *City Limits*, May 24, 1985.

⁶ Dave Laing, op cit, p 81.

⁷ Quoted in Andy Warhol and Bob Colacello, 'Michael Jackson', *Interview* magazine, October 1982.

'Thriller', the LP title track, was released as the third single from the album. The accompanying video went beyond the then-established conventions and limitations of the medium. According to Dave Laing, these conventions have been tied to the economic imperative of music video:

*first, the visuals were subordinated to the soundtrack, which they were there to sell; second, music video as a medium for marketing immediately inherited an aesthetic and a set of techniques from the pre-existing and highly developed form of television commercials.*⁶

Thus one convention, that of fast-editing derived from the montage codes of TV advertising, has been overlaid with another: that of an alternation between naturalistic or 'realist' modes of representation (in which the song is performed 'live' or in a studio and mimed to by the singer or group) and 'constructed' or fantastic modes of representation (in which the singer/group acts out imaginary roles implied by the lyrics or by the 'atmosphere' of the music). 'Thriller' incorporates the montage and alternation conventions, but organises the flow of images by framing it with a powerful *story-telling* or *narrational* direction which provides continuity and closure. Since 'Thriller' this story-telling code has itself become a music video convention: director Julien Temple's 'Under Cover of Night' (Rolling Stones, 1983) and 'Jazzin' for Blue Jean' (David Bowie, 1984) represent two of the more imaginative examples of this narrativisation of the music by the direction of the flow of images. 'Thriller' is distinguished not only by its internal and formal structure, but also by the fact that it is 'detached' from a primary economic imperative or rationale. The LP was already a 'monster' of a commercial success before the title track was released as a single: there was no need for a 'hard sell'. Thus the 'Thriller' video does not so much seek to promote the record as a primary product, but rather *celebrates the success the LP has brought Michael Jackson* by acting as a vehicle to showcase its star. In the absence of a direct economic imperative, the video can indulge Jackson's own interest in acting: its use of cinematic codes and structures provides a framework for Jackson to act as a 'movie-star'. Jackson himself had acted before, in *The Wiz* (1977), an all-black remake of *The Wizard of Oz* in which he played the Scarecrow. He professes a deep fascination with acting:

*I love it so much. It's escape. It's fun. It's just neat to become another thing, another person. Especially when you really believe it and it's not like you're acting. I always hated the word 'acting' – to say, 'I am an actor'. It should be more than that. It should be more like a believer.*⁷

In 'Thriller' Jackson acts out a variety of roles as the video engages in a playful parody of the stereotypes, codes and conventions of the 'horror' genre. The inter-textual dialogues between film, dance and music which the video articulates also draw us, the spectators, into the *play* of signs and meanings at work in the 'constructedness' of the star's image. The following reading of the music video considers the specificity of the

music track, asks how the video 'visualises' the music and then goes on to examine the internal structure of the video as an inter-text of sound, image and style.

'Thriller': A Reading

Consider first the specificity of the music track. The title, which gives the LP its title as well, is the name for a particular genre of film – the 'murder-mystery-suspense' film, the detective story, the thriller. But the lyrics of the song are not 'about' film or cinema. The track is a mid-tempo funk number, written by Rod Temperton, and recalls similar numbers written by the author for the Jacksons such as 'Blame it on the Boogie'. The lyrics evoke allusions and references to the cinematic culture of 'terror' and 'horror' movies but only to play on the meaning of the word 'thriller'. The lyrics weave a little story, which could be summarised as 'a night of viewing some...gruesome horror movies with a lady friend'.⁸ The lyrics narrate such a fictional scene by speaking in the first person:

It's close to midnight and somethin' evil's lurkin' in the dark/. . . . You try to scream, but terror takes the sound before you make it/You start to freeze, as horror looks you right between the eyes/You're paralysed.

Who is this 'you' being addressed? The answer comes in the semantic turn-around of the third verse and chorus in which the pun on the title is made evident:

Now is the time for you and I to cuddle close together/All thru' the night, I'll save you from the terror on the screen/I'll make you see, that [Chorus] This is thriller, thriller-night, 'cause I could thrill you more than any ghost would dare to try/Girl, this is thriller . . . so let me hold you tight and share a killer, thriller tonight'.⁹

Thus the lyrics play a *double-entendre* on the meaning of 'thrill'.

As Iain Chambers has observed,

*Distilled into the metalanguage of soul and into the clandestine cultural liberation of soul music is the regular employment of a sexual discourse.*¹⁰

Along with the emotional complexities of intimate relationships, physical sexuality is perhaps the central preoccupation of the soul tradition. But, as Chambers suggests, the power of soul as a cultural form to express sexuality does not so much lie in the literal meanings of the words but in the passion of the singer's voice and vocal performance. The explicit meanings of the lyrics are in this sense secondary to the sensual resonance of the individual character of the voice, its 'grain'. While the 'grain' of the voice encodes the contradictions of sexual relationships, their pleasures and pain, the insistence of the rhythm is an open

⁸ Nelson George, *op cit*, p 108.

⁹ From *The Great Songs of Michael Jackson*, London, Wise Publications, 1984.

¹⁰ Iain Chambers, *Urban Rhythms: Pop Music and Popular Culture*, London, Macmillan, 1985, p 148.

¹¹ *ibid*, pp 143-148
passim; see also,
Richard Dyer, 'In
Defence of Disco',
Gay Left no 8,
Summer 1979.

invitation to the body to dance. Dance, as cultural form and sexual ritual, is a mode of decoding the sound and meaning articulated in the music. In its incitement of the listener to dance, to become an active participant in the texture of voice, words and rhythm, soul music is not only 'about' sexuality, but is itself a musical means for the eroticisation of the body.¹¹ In 'Thriller' it is the 'grain' of Jackson's voice that expresses and plays with this sexual sub-text and it is this dimension that transgresses the denotation of the lyrics and escapes analytic reduction. Jackson's interpretation of Temperton's lyric inflects the allusions to cinema to thematise a discourse on sexuality, rather than film, and the 'story' created by the lyrics sets up a reverberation between two semantic poles: the invocation of macabre movies is offset by the call to 'cuddle close together'.

The element of irony set in motion by this semantic polarity is the 'literary' aspect of the sense of parody that pervades the song. Special sound effects—creaking doors and howling dogs—contribute to the pun on the title. Above all, this play of parody spreads out in Vincent Price's rap, which closes the record. The idea of a well-established white movie actor like Price delivering a 'rap', a distinctly black urban cultural form, is funny enough. But the fruity, gurgling tones of the actor's voice, which immediately invoke the semi-comic self-parody of 'horror' he has become, express the affectionate sense of humour that underpins the song:

Darkness falls across the land. The midnight hour is close at hand. Creatures crawl in search of blood, to terrorise y'awl's neighbourhood. And whosoever shall be found, without the soul for getting down, must stand and face the hounds of hell, and rot inside a corpse's shell.

The parody at play here lies in the quotation of soul argot—'get down', 'midnight hour', 'funk of forty thousand years'—in the completely different context of horror movies. The almost camp quality of refined exaggeration in Price's voice and his 'British' accent is at striking odds with the discourse of black American soul music.

As we 'listen' to the production of meanings in the music track the various 'voices' involved in the production (Temperton, Jackson, Price, Quincy Jones, etc) are audibly combined into parody. One way of approaching the transition from music to video, then, would be to suggest that John Landis, its director, brings aspects of his own 'voice' as an 'author' of Hollywood films into this dialogue. It seems to me that Landis' voice contributes to the puns and play on the meaning of 'thriller' by drawing on conventions of mainstream horror movies.

Story, Plot and Parody

Landis introduces two important elements from film into the medium of music video: a narrative direction of the flow of images and special-

effects techniques associated with the pleasures of the horror film. These effects are used in the two scenes that show the metamorphosis of Michael into, first, a werewolf, and then a zombie. The use of these cinematic technologies to create the metamorphoses is clearly what distinguishes 'Thriller' from other music video. 'Thriller' gives the video audience *real thrills*—the 'thrill' of tension, anxiety and fear associated with the pleasure offered by the horror genre. The spectacle of the visceral transformation of cute, lovable Michael Jackson into a howlin' wolf of a monster is disturbing, because it seems so convincing, 'real' and fascinating. As Philip Brophy remarks,

*The pleasure of the (horror) text is, in fact, getting the shit scared out of you – and loving it: an exchange mediated by adrenalin.*¹²

Both special effects and narrative return us to the direction of John Landis, who also directed *An American Werewolf in London* (1979). *American Werewolf* is a horror comedy; it retells the traditional werewolf myth, setting its protagonists as tourists in England attacked by a strange animal, into which one of them then turns during the full moon. The film employs pop tunes to exacerbate its underlying parody of this mythology—'Moondance' (Van Morrison), 'Bad Moon Rising' (Credence Clearwater Revival) and 'Blue Moon' (Frankie Lymon and the Teen-agers). And this humour is combined with special-effects and make-up techniques which show the bodily metamorphosis of man to wolf in 'real time', as opposed to less credible 'time-lapse' techniques. The 'Thriller' video not only refers to this film, but to other generic predecessors, including *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) by George Romero and *Halloween* (1978) by John Carpenter. Indeed, the video is strewn with allusions to horror films. As Brophy observes:

*It is a genre which mimics itself mercilessly – because its statement is coded in its very mimicry... It is not so much that the modern horror film refutes or ignores the conventions of genre, but it is involved in a violent awareness of itself as a saturated genre.*¹³

Thus cinematic horror seems impelled towards parody of its own codes and conventions.¹⁴ With hindsight it is tempting to suggest that 'Thriller's' music track was almost made to be filmed, as it seems to cue these cinematic references. Certain points within the video appear to be straightforward transpositions from the song: 'They're out to get you, there's demons closin' in on ev'ry side/... Night creatures call and the dead start to walk in their masquerade', and so on. But it is at the level of its *narrative structure* that the video engages in an inter-textual dialogue with the music track. The following synopsis aims to outline this structure:

¹² Philip Brophy, 'Horrority', reprinted in this issue of *Screen*.

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ SS Prawer, *Caligari's Children: The Film as Tale of Terror*, Oxford University Press, 1980.

¹⁵ The 'Thriller' video is generally available as part of *The Making of Michael Jackson's Thriller*, Warner Home Video, 1984.

¹⁶ Stephen Neale, *Genre*, London, British Film Institute, 1980, pp 21, 56, 62.

The video opens with a car driving through woods at night. The engine cuts out and a teenage couple, 'Michael' (played by Michael Jackson) and an unnamed girl (played by Ola Ray), get out of the car and walk. Michael tells the delighted girl that he would like to be her boyfriend, but then confesses that he is 'different from other guys'. The girl's puzzled look turns into terror as Michael undergoes a metamorphosis into a werewolf. She flees and a chase ensues culminating in Michael as monster pouncing on the girl.

The scene then shifts to Michael and the girl as a couple in a cinema audience, watching (by implication) what we have just seen. The girl becomes frightened and leaves. Michael is enthralled and remains seated but then gets up to join her in the foyer. As they walk away from the cinema the music track fades up and he begins to sing, darting around the girl as they walk.

After the first two verses Vincent Price's rap comes on to the soundtrack as corpses rise from a graveyard and shuffle onto the street. Michael and the girl return into frame, to be encircled by the ghouls. The music track fades down and the girl turns to Michael to find him transformed into a zombie. Michael leads the Living Dead through a dance sequence, accompanied by the music track, culminating in the chorus (in which Michael returns to normal). The music fades down again and the girl flees to a deserted house, pursued by the zombies who violently break into the room in which she is hiding. Led by Michael as zombie, they close in on her.

As the girl screams, Michael is revealed as her boyfriend. He calms her and offers to take her home. As they exit, Michael turns to camera to show two yellow eyes and Vincent Price's laugh is heard.¹⁵

Unlike most pop videos 'Thriller' does not begin with the first notes of the song, but with a long panning shot and the 'cinematic' sound of recorded silence. This master-shot, establishing the all-seeing but invisible 'eye' of the camera, is comparable to the discursive function of third-person narration. The shot/reverse-shot series which frames the dialogue between the two protagonists in the opening sequence establishes 'point-of-view' camera angles, analogous to 'subjective', first-person modes of enunciation. It is the use of these specific cinematic codes of narration that structures the entire flow of images and gives the video a beginning, a middle and an end. 'Thriller' incorporates the pop video convention of switching from 'realist' to 'fantastic' modes of representation, but binds this into continuity and closure through its narrative. The two metamorphosis sequences are of crucial importance to this narrative structure; the first disrupts the 'equilibrium' of the opening sequence, and the second repeats but differs from the first in order to bring the flow of images to its end and re-establish equilibrium. Within the story-telling conventions of the horror genre the very appearance of the monster/werewolf/vampire/alien signals the violation of equilibrium: the presence of the monster activates the narrative dynamic whose goal or end is achieved by an act of counter-violence that eliminates it.¹⁶

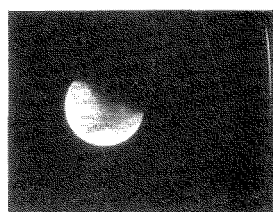
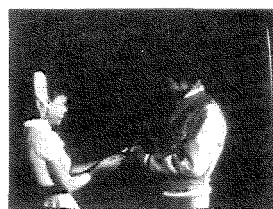
In the opening sequence of 'Thriller' equilibrium is established and then disrupted.

LS/Pan Large 1950s-looking car drives slowly along the road through woods at night.

MCU/shot-reverse shot Michael (M) and girl (G) in front seats of the car, framed in profile. As car stops G looks at M in disbelief. M looks back and smiles to himself, laughs: 'Honestly, we're out of gas.' G turns her head coquettishly: 'So what are we going to do now?'. M smiles.

MS/shot-reverse shot M and G walk side by side, camera gradually tilts from ground to eye level. G hangs onto M's arm: 'I'm sorry I didn't believe you.' M stops and turns to face G: 'Can I ask you something? ... You know I like you, don't you?' ('Yes.') ... And I hope you like me the way I like you ... ('Yes.') ... I was wondering if you would be my girl?' G cries out 'Michael!' and rushes to embrace him. M proffers a ring and places it on her finger. She looks at it, gleaming. G: 'Its beautiful!' M: 'Now it's official ... I have something I want to tell you.' M's facial expression changes and 'creepy clarinets' fade up on the music score. G: 'Yes, Michael?' M: 'I'm not like other guys', G: 'Of course not, that's why I love you.' M: 'No, I mean I'm different.' G: 'What are you talking about?'

The music score swirls up in volume and the shot-reverse shot series is broken by an insert of clouds across a full moon. G looks at M with a puzzled expression. M holds his stomach and contorts his face, letting out gasps and squeaks. G: 'Michael, are you all right?' M raises his head to reveal two yellow eyes: 'Go away' he/it cries. G screams in terror. *Metamorphosis I.*



The dialogue and exchange of glances between Michael and the girl as the male and female protagonists of the story establish 'romance' as the narrative pre-text. The girl's look at Michael as the car stops hints at a question, answered by the expression of bemused incredulity on his face. Did he stop the car on purpose? Was it a romantic ruse, to lure her into a trap? The girl's coquettish response to Michael's defence ('Honestly, we're out of gas') lingers sensually on the syllables, 'So ... what are we going to do now?' Her question, and his smile in return, hint at and exacerbate the underlying erotic tension of romantic intrigue between the two characters. Michael's dialogue gives a minimal 'character' to his role as the boyfriend: he appears a somewhat shy, very proper and polite 'boy next door'. The girl, on the other hand, is not so much a 'character' as the 'girlfriend' type. At another level, their clothes – a pastiche '50s retro style – connote youthful innocence, the couple as archetypal teen

lovers. But this innocent representation is unsettled by Michael's statement: 'I'm not like other guys.' The statement implies a question posed on the terrain of gender, and masculinity in particular: why is he different from 'other guys'?

The sequence provides an answer in the boyfriend's transformation into a monster. But, although the metamorphosis resolves the question, it is at the cost of disrupting the equilibrium of 'romance' between the two protagonists, which is now converted into a relation of terror between monster and victim. The chase through the woods is the final sequence of this 'beginning' of the narrative. The subsequent scene, returning to Michael and the girl as a couple in a cinema, re-establishes the equation of 'romance' and repositions the protagonists as girlfriend and boyfriend, but at another level of representation.



MS M and G in third row of cinema. Audience screams. G, looking with horror at the screen, clings to M.

CU G hugs M, who stares at the screen chewing popcorn and laughing.

LS Audience screams.

CU G turns her head away and steals a look back at the screen. Voices off-frame, from the screen – 'Sheriff, he's over here. God, look at that thing!' (gun-shot) 'Look out!' G: 'Can we get out of here?'

CU M: 'No, I'm enjoying this'. Continues grinning at the screen.

CU 'Well... I can't watch.'

MCU G gets up to leave, exits right.

CU M continues grinning, munching and staring at the screen. Voices off-frame, from the screen: '...scrawled in blood... What does it say?... See you next Wednesday.' Screams from cinema audience.

MS M gets up and exits right.

LS Panning shot from high angle moving downwards revealing the words 'Palace Cinema' with 'Vincent Price/Thriller' on marquee. Music track fades up. Camera gradually frames cinema facade.



LS G walks out of the cinema; M runs after her – both framed by the title 'Thriller' on awnings. M: 'It's only a movie' (laughing).

G: 'It's not funny.'
 M: 'You were scared, weren't you?'
 G: 'I wasn't that scared'.
 M: 'Naw...you were scared'. M laughs. G turns and exits right. M follows. Beginning of song-sequence.

In structural terms this shift in modes of representation, from a fantastic level (in which the metamorphosis and chase take place) to a realist level (in which the song is performed) is important because it retrospectively implies that the entire opening sequence was a film within a film, or rather, a film within the video. More to the point, the 'beginning' is thus revealed to be a *parody of '50s B-movie horror*. This has been signalled in the self-conscious 'acting' mannerisms Jackson employs and by the pastiche of '50s teenager styles. The shift from a parody of a '50s horror movie to the cinema audience watching the film and the long shot of the cinema showing the film, visually acknowledge this 'violent awareness of itself as saturated genre'.

While Hammer were reviving the Universal monsters... American International Pictures began a cycle whose appreciation was almost entirely tongue-in-cheek – a perfect example of 'camp' manufacture and reception of the iconography of terror.

*The first film in this series bore the (now notorious) title **I Was A Teenage Werewolf** (1957)... The absurdity of the plot and acting, and the relentless pop music that filled the soundtrack, gave various kinds of pleasure to young audiences and encouraged the film-makers to follow this pilot movie with **I Was a Teenage Frankenstein** and with **Teenage Monster** and **Teenage Zombie** creations that were as awful to listen to as they were to see.¹⁷*

Parody depends on an explicit self-consciousness: in 'Thriller' this informs the dialogue, dress-style and acting in the opening sequence. In its parody of a parody it also acknowledges that there is no 'plot' as such: the narrative code that structures the video has no story to tell. Rather it creates a simulacrum of a story, a parody of a story, in its stylistic send-up of genre conventions. But it is precisely at the level of its self-consciousness that 'Thriller's' mimicry of the *gender roles* of the horror genre provides an anchor for the way it visualises the sexual discourse, the play on the meaning of the word 'thriller' on the music track.

Genre and Gender: 'Thriller's' Sexual Subtext

As the video switches from fantastic to realist modes of representation, the roles played by the two protagonists shift accordingly. The fictional film within the video, with its narrative pretext of 'romance', positions Michael and the girl as boyfriend and girlfriend, and within this the fantastic metamorphosis transforms the relation into one of terror between monster and victim. If we go back to Michael's statement made in this

¹⁸ On personal modes of enunciation in pop discourse, see Alan Durant, *Conditions of Music*, London, Macmillan, 1984, esp pp 201-206. The 'fantasy of being a pop star's girlfriend' is examined in Dave Rimmer, *Like Punk Never Happened: Culture Club and the New Pop*, London, Faber, 1985, p 112.

scene, 'I'm not like other guys', we can detect a confusion about the role he is playing.

The girl's initial reply, 'Of course not. That's why I love you', implies that it is obvious that he is 'different' because he is the real Michael Jackson. When, in her pleasure at his proposal, she calls him by his proper name she interpellates him in two roles at once—as fictional boyfriend and real superstar. This ambiguity of reference acknowledges Jackson's self-conscious acting style: we, the video audience, get the impression he is playing at playing a role and we 'know' that Jackson, the singer, the star, is playing at the role of a 'movie-star'. In 'Thriller' Michael's outfit and its stylistic features—the wet-look hairstyle, the ankle-cut jeans and the letter 'M' emblazoned on his jacket—reinforce this meta-textual superimposition of roles. If Michael, as the male protagonist, is both boyfriend and star, his female counterpart in the equation of 'romance' is both the girlfriend and at this meta-textual level, the fan. The girl is in two places at once: on screen and in the audience. As spectator of the film within the video she is horrified by the image on the screen and gets up to leave. 'Fooled' by the violent spectacle of the metamorphosis, she mistakes the fantastic for the real, she forgets that 'it's only a movie'. The girl's positions in the fictional and realist scenes mirror those of the video spectator—the effects which generate thrills for the audience are the events, in the story-world, that generate terror for the girl.

The girl occupies a mediated position between the audience and the image which offers a clue to the way the video visualises the music track. In the middle section, as the couple walk away from the cinema and Michael begins the song, the narrative roles of boyfriend and girlfriend are re-established, but now subordinated to the song's performance. This continuity of narrative function is underlined by the differentiation of costume style: Michael now wears a flashy red and black leather jacket cut in a 'futuristic' style and her ensemble is also contemporary—t-shirt, bomber jacket and head of curls like Michael's own. This imagery echoes publicity images of Jackson the stage performer. As the song gets under way Jackson becomes 'himself', the star. The girl becomes the 'you' in the refrain 'Girl, I could thrill you more than any ghost would dare to try.'

On the music track, the 'you' could be the listener, since the personal and direct mode of enunciation creates a space for the listener to enter and take part in the production of meanings. In the video, it is the girl who takes this place and, as the addressee of the sexual discourse enunciated in the song, her positions in the video-text create possibilities for spectatorial identification. These lines of identification are hinted at in the opening scene in which the girl's response to Michael's wooing enacts the 'fantasy of being a pop star's girlfriend', a fantasy which is realised in this section of the video.¹⁸

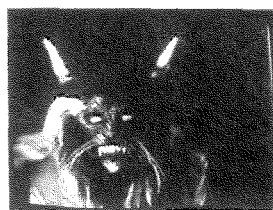
The conventions of horror inscribe a fascination with sexuality, with gender identity codified in terms that revolve around the symbolic presence of the monster. Women are invariably the victims of the acts of terror unleashed by the werewolf/vampire/alien/'thing': the monster as non-human Other. The destruction of the monster establishes male protagonists as heroes, whose object and prize is of course the woman. But as the predatory force against which the hero has to compete, the monster itself occupies a 'masculine' position in relation to the female victim.

'Thriller's' rhetoric of parody presupposes a degree of self-consciousness on the part of the spectator, giving rise to a supplementary commentary on the sexuality and sexual identity of its star, Michael Jackson. Thus, the warning 'I'm not like other guys' can be read by the audience as a reference to Jackson's sexuality. Inasmuch as the video audience is conscious of the gossip which circulates around the star, the statement of difference provokes other meanings: is he homosexual, transsexual or somehow presexual?

In the first metamorphosis Michael becomes a werewolf. As the recent *Company of Wolves* (directed by Neil Jordan, 1984) demonstrates, werewolf mythology—lycanthropy—concerns the representation of male sexuality as 'naturally' bestial, predatory, aggressive, violent—in a word, 'monstrous'. Like 'Thriller', *Company of Wolves* employs similar special effects to show the metamorphosis of man to wolf in 'real time'. And like the Angela Carter story on which it is based, the film can be read to rewrite the European folktale of 'Little Red Riding Hood' to reveal its concerns with subjects of menstruation, the moon and the nature of male sexuality. In the fictional opening scene of 'Thriller' the connotation of innocence around the girl liken her to Red Riding Hood. But is Michael a big, bad wolf?

In the culmination of the chase sequence through the woods, the girl takes the role of victim. Here, the disposition of point-of-view angles between the monster's dominant position and the supine position of the victim suggests rape, fusing the underlying sexual relation of 'romance' with terror and violence. As the monster, Michael's transformation might suggest that beneath the boy-next-door image there is a 'real' man waiting to break out, a man whose masculinity is measured by a rapacious sexual appetite, 'hungry like the wolf'. But such an interpretation is undermined and subverted by the final shot of the metamorphosis. Michael-as-werewolf lets out a blood-curdling howl, but this is in hilarious counterpoint to the collegiate 'M' on his jacket. What does it stand for? Michael? Monster? Macho Man? More like Mickey Mouse. The incongruity between the manifest signifier and the symbolic meaning of the Monster opens up a gap in the text, to be filled with laughter.

Animals are regularly used to signify human attributes, with the wolf, lion, snake and eagle all understood as signs of male sexuality. Jackson's subversion of this symbolism is writ large on the *Thriller* LP cover.





¹⁹ One of Freud's most famous patients, The Wolf Man, makes connections between animals and sexuality clear. The Wolf Man's dream also reads like a horror film: 'I dreamt that it was night and that I was lying on my bed. Suddenly the window opened of its own accord, and I was terrified to see some white wolves were sitting on the big walnut tree in front of the window.' See Muriel Gardiner, *The Wolf Man and Sigmund Freud*, London, Hogarth Press and Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1973, p 173. Freud's reading suggests that the terror in the dream manifests a fear of castration for a repressed homosexual desire.

²⁰ Quoted in Nelson George, *op cit*, p 83-4.

²¹ The notion of 'cryptonymy' as a name for unconscious meanings emerges in Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok's re-reading of Freud's Wolf Man. See Peggy Kamuf, 'Abraham's Wake', *Diacritics*, Spring 1979, vol 9 no 1, pp 32-43.

Across the star's knee lies a young tiger cub, a brilliant little metaphor for the ambiguity of Jackson's image as a black male pop star. This plays on the star's 'man-child' image and suggests a domesticated animality, hinting at menace beneath the cute and cuddly surface. Jackson's sexual ambiguity makes a mockery out of the menagerie of received images of masculinity.¹⁹

In the second metamorphosis Michael becomes a zombie. Less dramatic and 'horrifying' than the first, this transformation cues the spectacular dance sequence that frames the chorus of the song. While the dance, choreographed by Michael Peters, makes visual one of the lines from the lyric, 'Night creatures crawl and the dead start to walk in their masquerade', it foregrounds Jackson-the-dancer and his performance breaks loose from the video. As the ghouls begin to dance, the sequence elicits the same kind of parodic humour provoked by Vincent Price's rap on the music track. There humour lay in the incongruity between Price's voice and the argot of black soul culture. Here a visual equivalent of this incongruity is created by the spectacle of the living dead performing with Jackson a funky dance routine. The sense of parody is intensified by the macabre make-up of the ghouls, bile dripping from their mouths. Jackson's make-up, casting a ghostly pallor over his skin and emphasising the contour of the skull, alludes to one of the paradigmatic 'masks' of the horror genre, that of Lon Chaney in *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925).

Unlike the werewolf the figure of the zombie, the undead corpse, does not represent sexuality so much as asexuality or anti-sexuality, suggesting the sense of *neutral eroticism* in Jackson's style as dancer. As has been observed:

*The movie star Michael most resembles is Fred Astaire – that paragon of sexual vagueness. Astaire never fit a type, hardly ever played a traditional romantic lead. He created his own niche by the sheer force of his tremendous talent.*²⁰

The dance sequence can be read as cryptic writing on this 'sexual vagueness' of Jackson's body in movement, in counterpoint to the androgyny of his image. The dance breaks loose from the narrative and Michael's body comes alive in movement, a rave from the grave: the scene can thus be seen as a commentary on the notion that as star Jackson only 'comes alive' when he is on stage performing. The living dead invoke an existential liminality which corresponds to both the sexual indeterminacy of Jackson's dance and the somewhat morbid lifestyle that reportedly governs his offscreen existence. Both meanings are buried in the video 'cryptogram'.²¹

Metaphor-morphosis

Finally, I feel compelled to return to the scene of the first metamorphosis. It enthralls and captivates, luring the spectator's gaze and

petrifying it in wonder. This sense of both fear and fascination is engineered by the video's special effects. By showing the metamorphosis in 'real time' the spectacle violently distorts the features of Jackson's face. The horror-effect of the monster's appearance depends on the 'suspension of disbelief': we know that the monster is a fiction, literally a mask created by mechanical techniques, but repress or disavow this knowledge to participate in the 'thrills', the pleasures expected from the horror-text. Yet in this splitting of belief which the horror film presupposes, it is credibility of the techniques themselves that is at stake in making the 'otherness' of the monster believable²².

The Making of Michael Jackson's Thriller (1984) demonstrates the special effects used in the video. We see make-up artists in the process of applying the 'mask' that will give Jackson the appearance of the monster. Of particular interest is the make-up artists' explanation of how the werewolf mask was designed and constructed: a series of transparent cells, each with details of the animal features of the mask, are gradually superimposed on a publicity image of Jackson from the cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine. It is this superimposition of fantastic and real upon Jackson's face that offers clues as to why the metamorphosis is so effective. Like the opening parody of the '50s horror movie and its confusion of roles that Jackson is playing (boyfriend/star), there is a slippage between different levels of belief on the part of the spectator.

The metamorphosis achieves a horrifying effect because the monster does not just mutilate the appearance of the boyfriend, but plays on the audience's awareness of Jackson's double role; thus, the credibility of the special effects violates the image of the star himself. At this meta-textual level, the drama of the transformation is heightened by other performance-signs that foreground Jackson as star. The squeaks, cries and other wordless sounds which emanate from his throat as he grips his stomach grotesquely mimic the sounds which are the stylistic trademark of Jackson's voice and thus reinforce the impression that it is the 'real' Michael Jackson undergoing this mutation. Above all, the very first shots of the video highlight the make-up on the star's face (particularly the eyes and lips), the pallor of his complexion, revealing the eerie sight of his skull beneath the wet-look curls. The very appearance of Jackson draws attention to the artificiality of his own image. As the monstrous mask is, literally, a construction made out of make-up and cosmetic 'work', the fictional world of the horror film merely appropriates what is already an artifice. I suggest that the metamorphosis be seen as a *metaphor for the aesthetic reconstruction of Michael Jackson's face*.

The literal construction of the fantastic monster-mask refers to other images of the star: the referent of the mask, as a sign in its own right, is a commonplace publicity image taken from the cover of a magazine. In this sense the mask refers not to the real person or private 'self' but to Michael Jackson-as-an-image. The metamorphosis could thus be seen as an accelerated allegory of the morphological development of Jackson's facial features: from child to adult, from boyfriend to monster, from star

²³ Geoff Brown, *Michael Jackson: Body and Soul*, London, Virgin Books, 1984, p 10.

²⁴ Roland Barthes, 'The Face of Garbo' in *Mythologies*, London, Paladin, 1972, pp 56-7.

to superstar – the sense of wonder generated by the video's special effects forms an allegory for the fascination with which the world beholds this star-as-image.

In 1983, Jackson took part in a two-hour TV special to celebrate Motown's twenty-fifth anniversary, in which vintage footage was intercut with each act's performance; the film was then edited and used as a 'support' act on Motown artists' tours in England. This is how the reception of the film was described:

*The audience almost visibly tensed as Michael's voice... took complete control, attacking the songs with that increased repertoire of whoops, hiccups and gasps, with which he punctuates the lyric to such stylish, relaxing effect. And then he danced. The cocky strut of a super-confident child had been replaced by a lithe, menacing grace, and his impossibly lean frame, still boyishly gangly, when galvanised by the music, assumed a hypnotic, androgynous sexuality. Certainly, it was the first time in a long, long time I'd heard girls scream at a film screen....*²³

Amid all the screaming elicited by 'Thriller' it is possible to hear a parody of those fans' response. As a pop idol Michael Jackson has been the object of such screaming since he was eleven years old.

In 'The Face of Garbo' Barthes sought to explore the almost universal appeal of film stars like Chaplin, Hepburn and Garbo by describing their faces as *masks*: aesthetic surfaces on which a society writes large its own preoccupations.²⁴ Jackson's face can also be seen as such a mask, for his image has attracted and maintained the kind of cultural fascination that makes him more like a movie star than a modern rhythm and blues artist. The sexual and racial ambiguity of his image can be seen as pointing to a range of questions about images of sex and race in popular culture and popular music. If we regard his face, not as the manifestation of personality traits but as a surface of artistic and social inscription, the ambiguities of Jackson's image call into question received ideas about what black male artists in popular music should look like. Seen from this angle his experimentation with imagery represents a creative incursion upon a terrain in pop culture more visibly mapped out by white male stars like Mick Jagger, David Bowie and Boy George. At best, these stars have used androgyny and sexual ambiguity as part of their 'style' in ways which question prevailing definitions of male sexuality and sexual identity. Key songs on *Thriller* highlight this problematisation of masculinity: on 'Wanna Be Startin' Somethin' the narrator replies to rumour and speculation about his sexuality, on 'Billy Jean' – a story about a fan who claims he is the father of her son – he refuses the paternal model of masculinity, and on 'Beat It' – 'Don't wanna see no blood, Don't be a macho man' – he explicitly refuses a bellicose model of manliness.

What makes Jackson's use of androgyny more compelling is that his work is located entirely in the Afro-American tradition of popular music and thus must be seen in the context of imagery of black men and black male sexuality. Jackson not only questions dominant stereotypes of black

²⁵ On stereotypes of black men in popular culture (music, film, entertainment and sports) see Isaac Julien, *The Other Look*, unpublished BA dissertation and video, St Martins School of Art, 1983; Jim Pines, *Blacks in Film*, London, Studio Vista, 1975. For a critical discussion of black male gender

masculinity²⁵, but also gracefully steps outside the existing range of 'types' of black men. In so doing his style reminds us how some black men in the soul tradition such as Little Richard used 'camp', in the sense that Susan Sontag calls 'the love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration'²⁶, long before white pop stars began to exploit its 'shock-value'. Indeed, 'Thriller' is reminiscent of the 'camp' excesses of the originator of the combination of music and horror in pop culture, Screamin' Jay Hawkins. Horror imagery has fascinated the distinctly white male genre of 'heavy metal' in which acts like Alice Cooper and Ozzy Osbourne (Black Sabbath) consume themselves in self-parody. But like Hawkins, whose 'I Put a Spell on You' (1956) borrowed from images of horror to articulate a scream 'that found its way out of my big mouth directly through my heart and guts'²⁷, Jackson expresses another sort of 'screaming', one that articulates the erotic materiality of the human voice, its 'grain'. Writing about a musical tradition radically different from soul, Barthes coined this term to give 'the impossible account of an individual thrill that I constantly experience in listening to singing'²⁸. 'Thriller' celebrates the fact that this thrill is shared by millions.

roles, see Robert Staples, *Black Masculinity*, USA, Black Scholar Press, 1982 (UK dist. New Beacon Books, London).

²⁶ Susan Sontag, 'Notes on "Camp"', in *Against Interpretation*, Dell (USA), 1970.

²⁷ Quoted in Gerri Hirshey, *Nowhere to Run: The Story of Soul Music*, London, Pan, 1984, pp 3-22.

²⁸ Roland Barthes, 'The Grain of the Voice', op cit, p 181.

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HORROR AND THE MONSTROUS-FEMININE: AN IMAGINARY ABJECTION

BY BARBARA CREED

I

Mother's not herself today. —Norman Bates, *Psycho*

¹ Sigmund Freud, 'Fetishism', *On Sexuality*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, Pelican Freud Library, vol 7, 1981, p 354.

² Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology*, New York, Penguin, 1969, p 73.

³ Sigmund Freud, 'Medusa's Head', in James Strachey (ed), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol 18, London, Hogarth Press, 1964, pp 273-274.

⁴ *ibid*, p 273.

ALL HUMAN SOCIETIES have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject. 'Probably no male human being is spared the terrifying shock of threatened castration at the sight of the female genitals,' Freud wrote in his paper, 'Fetishism' in 1927.¹ Joseph Campbell, in his book, *Primitive Mythology*, noted that:

... there is a motif occurring in certain primitive mythologies, as well as in modern surrealist painting and neurotic dream, which is known to folklore as 'the toothed vagina'—the vagina that castrates. And a counterpart, the other way, is the so-called 'phallic mother,' a motif perfectly illustrated in the long fingers and nose of the witch.²

Classical mythology also was populated with gendered monsters, many of which were female. The Medusa, with her 'evil eye', head of writhing serpents and lolling tongue, was queen of the pantheon of female monsters; men unfortunate enough to look at her were turned immediately to stone.

It is not by accident that Freud linked the sight of the Medusa to the equally horrifying sight of the mother's genitals, for the concept of the monstrous-feminine, as constructed within/by a patriarchal and phallogocentric ideology, is related intimately to the problem of sexual difference and castration. In 1922 he argued that the 'Medusa's head takes the place of a representation of the female genitals'³; if we accept Freud's interpretation, we can see that the Perseus myth is mediated by a narrative about the *difference* of female sexuality as a difference which is grounded in monstrousness and which invokes castration anxiety in the male spectator. 'The sight of the Medusa's head makes the spectator stiff with terror, turns him to stone.'⁴ The irony of this was not lost on Freud,

who pointed out that becoming stiff also means having an erection. 'Thus in the original situation it offers consolation to the spectator: he is still in possession of a penis, and the stiffening reassures him of the fact.'⁵ One wonders if the experience of horror – of viewing the horror film – causes similar alterations in the body of the male spectator. And what of other phrases that apply to both male and female viewers – phrases such as: 'It scared the shit out of me'; 'It made me feel sick'; 'It gave me the creeps'? What is the relationship between physical states, bodily wastes (even if metaphoric ones) and the horrific – in particular, the monstrous-feminine?

II

Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*⁶ provides us with a preliminary hypothesis for an analysis of these questions. Although this study is concerned with literature, it nevertheless suggests a way of situating the monstrous-feminine in the horror film in relation to the maternal figure and what Kristeva terms 'abjection', that which does not 'respect borders, positions, rules' ... that which 'disturbs identity, system, order' (p 4). In general terms, Kristeva is attempting to explore the different ways in which abjection, as a source of horror, works within patriarchal societies, as a means of separating the human from the non-human and the fully constituted subject from the partially formed subject. Ritual becomes a means by which societies both renew their initial contact with the abject element and then exclude that element.

Through ritual, the demarcation lines between human and non-human are drawn up anew and presumably made all the stronger for that process. One of the key figures of abjection is the mother who becomes an abject at that moment when the child rejects her for the father who represents the symbolic order. The problem with Kristeva's theory, particularly for feminists, is that she never makes clear her position on the oppression of women. Her theory moves uneasily between explanation of, and justification for, the formation of human societies based on the subordination of women.

Kristeva grounds her theory of the maternal in the abject, tracing its changing definitions from the period of the pagan or mother-goddess religions through to the time of Judaic monotheism and to its culmination in Christianity. She deals with abjection in the following forms: as a rite of defilement in paganism; as a biblical abomination, a taboo, in Judaism; and as self-defilement, an interiorisation, in Christianity. Kristeva, however, does not situate abjection solely within a ritual or religious context. She argues that it is 'rooted historically (in the history of religions) and subjectively (in the structuration of the subject's identity), in the cathexis of maternal function – mother, woman, reproduction' (p 91). Kristeva's central interest, however, lies with the structuring of subjectivity within and by the processes of abjectivity in which the subject is spoken by the abject through both religious and

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1982. All page citations will be included in the text.

cultural discourses, that is, through the subject's position within the practices of the rite as well as within language.

But the question for the analyst-semiologist is to know how far one can analyze ritual impurity. The historian of religion stops soon: the critically impure is that which is based on a natural 'loathing.' The anthropologist goes further: there is nothing 'loathsome' in itself; the loathsome is that which disobeys classification rules peculiar to the given symbolic system. But as far as I am concerned, I keep asking questions.... Are there no subjective structururations that, within the organization of each speaking being, correspond to this or that symbolic-social system and represent, if not stages, at least types of subjectivity and society? Types that would be defined, in the last analysis, according to the subject's position in language...? (p 92)

A full examination of this theory is outside the scope of this article; I propose to draw mainly on Kristeva's discussion of abjection in its construction in the human subject in relation to her notions of (a) the 'border' and (b) the mother-child relationship. At crucial points, I shall also refer to her writing on the abject in relation to religious discourses. This area cannot be ignored, for what becomes apparent in reading her work is that definitions of the monstrous as constructed in the modern horror text are grounded in ancient religious and historical notions of abjection—particularly in relation to the following religious 'abominations': sexual immorality and perversion; corporeal alteration, decay and death; human sacrifice; murder; the corpse; bodily wastes; the feminine body and incest.

The place of the abject is 'the place where meaning collapses' (p 2), the place where 'I' am not. The abject threatens life; it must be 'radically excluded' (p 2) from the place of the living subject, propelled away from the body and deposited on the other side of an imaginary border which separates the self from that which threatens the self. Kristeva quotes Bataille:

Abjection (...) is merely the inability to assume with sufficient strength the imperative act of excluding abject things (and that act establishes the foundations of collective existence). (p 56)

Although the subject must exclude the abject, it must, nevertheless, be tolerated, for that which threatens to destroy life also helps to define life. Further, the activity of exclusion is necessary to guarantee that the subject take up his/her proper place in relation to the symbolic.

To each ego its object, to each superego its abject. It is not the white expanse or slack boredom of repression, not the translations and transformations of desire that wrench bodies, nights and discourse; rather it is a brutish suffering that 'I' puts up with, sublime and devastated, for 'I' deposits it to the father's account (verse au pere – pere-version): I endure it, for I

imagine such is the desire of the other On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of my culture. (p 2)

The abject can be experienced in various ways—one of which relates to biological bodily functions, the other of which has been inscribed in a symbolic (religious) economy. For instance, Kristeva claims that food loathing is ‘perhaps the most elementary and archaic form of abjection’ (p 2). Food, however, only becomes abject if it signifies a border ‘between two distinct entities or territories’ (p 75). Kristeva describes how, for her, the skin on the top of milk, which is offered to her by her father and mother, is a ‘sign of their desire’, a sign separating her world from their world, a sign which she does not want. ‘But since the food is not an “other” for “me,” who am only in their desire, I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which “I” claim to establish *myself*’ (p 3). Dietary prohibitions are, of course, central to Judaism. Kristeva argues that these are directly related to the prohibition of incest; she argues this not just because this position is supported by psychoanalytic discourse and structural anthropology but also because ‘the biblical text, as it proceeds, comes back, at the intensive moments of its demonstration and expansion, to that mytheme of the archaic relation to the mother’ (p 106).

The ultimate in abjection is the corpse. The body protects itself from bodily wastes such as shit, blood, urine and pus by ejecting these substances just as it expels food that, for whatever reason, the subject finds loathsome. The body extricates itself from them and from the place where they fall, so that it might continue to live.

Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit — cadere, cadaver. If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expel. ‘I’ is expelled. (pp 3-4)

Within the biblical context, the corpse is also utterly abject. It signifies one of the most basic forms of pollution — the body without a soul. As a form of waste it represents the opposite of the spiritual, the religious symbolic.

Corpse fanciers, unconscious worshippers of a soulless body, are thus preeminent representatives of inimical religions, identified by their murderous cults. The priceless debt to great mother nature, from which the prohibitions of Yahwistic speech separates us, is concealed in such pagan cults. (p 109)

In relation to the horror film, it is relevant to note that several of the most popular horrific figures are ‘bodies without souls’ (the vampire), the ‘living corpse’ (the zombie) and corpse-eater (the ghoul). Here, the horror film constructs and confronts us with the fascinating, seductive

aspect of abjection. What is also interesting is that such ancient figures of abjection as the vampire, the ghoul, the zombie and the witch (one of whose many crimes was that she used corpses for her rites of magic) continue to provide some of the most compelling images of horror in the modern cinema. The werewolf, whose body signifies a collapse of the boundaries between human and animal, also belongs to this category.

Abjection also occurs where the individual fails to respect the law and where the individual is a hypocrite, a liar, a traitor.

Any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject, but premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge are even more so because they heighten the display of such fragility. He who denies morality is not abject; there can be grandeur in amorality. . . . Abjection, on the other hand, is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady. . . . (p 4)

Thus, abject things are those which highlight the 'fragility of the law' and which exist on the other side of the border which separates out the living subject from that which threatens its extinction. But abjection is not something of which the subject can ever feel free – it is always there, beckoning the self to take up its place, the place where meaning collapses. The subject, constructed in/through language, through a desire for meaning, is also spoken by the abject, the place of meaninglessness – thus, the subject is constantly beset by abjection which fascinates desire but which must be repelled for fear of self-annihilation. The crucial point is that abjection is always ambiguous. Like Bataille, Kristeva emphasises the attraction, as well as the horror, of the undifferentiated.

We may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it – on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger. But also because abjection itself is a composite of judgement and affect, of condemnation and yearning, of signs and drives. Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship. . . . (pp 9-10)

To the extent that abjection works on the socio-cultural arena, the horror film would appear to be, in at least three ways, an illustration of the work of abjection. Firstly, the horror film abounds in images of abjection, foremost of which is the corpse, whole and mutilated, followed by an array of bodily wastes such as blood, vomit, saliva, sweat, tears and putrifying flesh. In terms of Kristeva's notion of the border, when we say such-and-such a horror film 'made me sick' or 'scared the shit out of me'⁷ we are actually foregrounding that specific horror film as a 'work of abjection' or 'abjection at work' – in both a literal and metaphoric sense. Viewing the horror film signifies a desire not only for perverse pleasure (confronting sickening, horrific images, being filled with terror/desire for the undifferentiated) but also a desire, having taken pleasure in perversity, to throw up, throw out, eject the abject (from the safety of the spectator's seat).

Secondly, there is, of course, a sense in which the concept of a border is

⁷ For a discussion of the way in which the modern horror film works upon its audience see Philip Brophy, 'Horrority', reprinted in this issue of *Screen*.

central to the construction of the monstrous in the horror film; that which crosses or threatens to cross the 'border' is abject. Although the specific nature of the border changes from film to film, the function of the monstrous remains the same – to bring about an encounter between the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability. In some horror films the monstrous is produced at the border between human and in-human, man and beast (*Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, *King Kong*); in others the border is between the normal and the supernatural, good and evil (*Carrie*, *The Exorcist*, *The Omen*, *Rosemary's Baby*); or the monstrous is produced at the border which separates those who take up their proper gender roles from those who do not (*Psycho*, *Dressed to Kill*, *Reflection of Fear*); or the border is between normal and abnormal sexual desire (*Cruising*, *The Hunger*, *Cat People*).

In relation to the construction of the abject within religious discourses, it is interesting to note that various sub-genres of the horror film seem to correspond to religious categories of abjection. For instance, blood as a religious abomination becomes a form of abjection in the 'splatter' movie (*Texas Chainsaw Massacre*); cannibalism, another religious abomination, is central to the 'meat' movie (*Night of the Living Dead*, *The Hills Have Eyes*); the corpse as abomination becomes the abject of ghoul and zombie movies (*The Evil Dead*; *Zombie Flesheaters*); blood as a taboo object within religion is central to the vampire film (*The Hunger*) as well as the horror film in general (*Bloodsucking Freaks*); human sacrifice as a religious abomination is constructed as the abject of virtually all horror films; and bodily disfigurement as a religious abomination is also central to the slash movie, particularly those in which woman is slashed, the mark a sign of her 'difference', her impurity (*Dressed to Kill*, *Psycho*).

III

The third way in which the horror film illustrates the work of abjection refers to the construction of the maternal figure as abject. Kristeva argues that all individuals experience abjection at the time of their earliest attempts to break away from the mother. She sees the mother-child relation as one marked by conflict: the child struggles to break free but the mother is reluctant to release it. Because of the 'instability of the symbolic function' in relation to this most crucial area – 'the prohibition placed on the maternal body (as a defense against autoeroticism and incest taboo)' (p 14) – Kristeva argues that the maternal body becomes a site of conflicting desires. 'Here, drives hold sway and constitute a strange space that I shall name, after Plato (*Timeus*, 48-53), a *chora*, a receptacle' (p 14). The position of the child is rendered even more unstable because, while the mother retains a close hold over the child, it can serve to authenticate her existence – an existence which needs validation because of her problematic relation to the symbolic realm.

It is a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling. The difficulty the mother has in acknowledging (or being acknowledged by) the symbolic realm – in other words, the problem she has with the phallus that her father or husband stands for – is not such as to help the future subject leave the natural mansion. (p 13)

In the child's attempts to break away, the mother becomes an abject; thus, in this context, where the child struggles to become a separate subject, abjection becomes 'a precondition of narcissism' (p 13). Once again we can see abjection at work in the horror text where the child struggles to break away from the mother, representative of the archaic maternal figure, in a context in which the father is invariably absent (*Psycho*, *Carrie*, *The Birds*). In these films, the maternal figure is constructed as the monstrous-feminine. By refusing to relinquish her hold on her child, she prevents it from taking up its proper place in relation to the Symbolic. Partly consumed by the desire to remain locked in a blissful relationship with the mother and partly terrified of separation, the child finds it easy to succumb to the comforting pleasure of the dyadic relationship. Kristeva argues that a whole area of religion has assumed the function of tackling this danger:

This is precisely where we encounter the rituals of defilement and their derivatives, which, based on the feeling of abjection and all converging on the maternal, attempt to symbolize the other threat to the subject: that of being swamped by the dual relationship, thereby risking the loss not of a part (castration) but of the totality of his living being. The function of these religious rituals is to ward off the subject's fear of his very own identity sinking irretrievably into the mother. (p 64)

How, then, are prohibitions against contact with the mother enacted and enforced? In answering this question, Kristeva links the universal practices of rituals of defilement to the mother. She argues that within the practices of all rituals of defilement, polluting objects fall into two categories: excremental, which threatens identity from the outside, and menstrual, which threatens from within.

Excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.) stand for the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death. Menstrual blood, on the contrary, stands for the danger issuing from within identity (social or sexual); it threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate and, through internalization, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference. (p 71)

Both categories of polluting objects relate to the mother; the relation of menstrual blood is self-evident, the association of excremental objects with the maternal figure is brought about because of the mother's role in

sphincter training. Here, Kristeva argues that the subject's first contact with 'authority' is with the maternal authority when the child learns, through interaction with the mother, about its body: the shape of the body, the clean and unclean, the proper and improper areas of the body. Kristeva refers to this process as a 'primal mapping of the body' which she calls 'semiotic'. She distinguishes between maternal 'authority' and 'paternal laws':

Maternal authority is the trustee of that mapping of the self's clean and proper body; it is distinguished from paternal laws within which, with the phallic phase and acquisition of language, the destiny of man will take shape. (p 72)

In her discussion of rituals of defilement in relation to the Indian caste system, Kristeva draws a distinction between the maternal authority and paternal law. She argues that the period of the 'mapping of the self's clean and proper body' is characterised by the exercise of 'authority without guilt', a time when there is a 'fusion between mother and nature'. However, the symbolic ushers in a 'totally different universe of socially signifying performances where embarrassment, shame, guilt, desire etc. come into play – the order of the phallus'. In the Indian context, these two worlds exist harmoniously side by side because of the working of defilement rites. Here, Kristeva is referring to the practice of public defecation in India. She quotes V S Naipaul who says that no one ever mentions 'in speech or in books, those squatting figures, because, quite simply, no one sees them'. Kristeva argues that this split between the world of the mother (a universe without shame) and the world of the father (a universe of shame), would in other social contexts produce psychosis; in India it finds a 'perfect socialization':

*This may be because the setting up of the rite of defilement takes on the function of the hyphen, the virgule, allowing the two universes of **filth** and **prohibition** to brush lightly against each other without necessarily being identified as such, as **object** and as **law**. (p 74)*

Images of blood, vomit, pus, shit, etc. are central to our culturally/socially constructed notions of the horrific. They signify a split between two orders: the maternal authority and the law of the father. On the one hand, these images of bodily wastes threaten a subject that is already constituted, in relation to the symbolic, as 'whole and proper'. Consequently, they fill the subject – both the protagonist in the text and the spectator in the cinema – with disgust and loathing. On the other hand, they also point back to a time when a 'fusion between mother and nature' existed; when bodily wastes, while set apart from the body, were not seen as objects of embarrassment and shame. Their presence in the horror film may invoke a response of disgust from the audience situated as it is within the symbolic but at a more archaic level the representation of bodily wastes may invoke pleasure in breaking the taboo on filth – sometimes described as a pleasure in perversity – and a pleasure in returning

to that time when the mother-child relationship was marked by an untrammelled pleasure in 'playing' with the body and its wastes.

The modern horror film often 'plays' with its audience, saturating it with scenes of blood and gore, deliberately pointing to the fragility of the symbolic order in the domain of the body which never ceases to signal the repressed world of the mother. This is particularly evident in *The Exorcist*, where the world of the symbolic, represented by the priest-as-father, and the world of the pre-symbolic, represented by woman aligned with the devil, clashes head-on in scenes where the foulness of woman is signified by her putrid, filthy body covered in blood, urine, excrement and bile. Significantly, a pubescent girl about to menstruate played the woman who is possessed – in one scene blood from her wounded genitals mingles with menstrual blood to provide one of the film's key images of horror. In *Carrie*, the film's most monstrous act occurs when the couple are drenched in pig's blood which symbolises menstrual blood – women are referred to in the film as 'pigs', women 'bleed like pigs', and the pig's blood runs down Carrie's body at a moment of intense pleasure, just as her own menstrual blood runs down her legs during a similar pleasurable moment when she enjoys her body in the shower. Here, women's blood and pig's blood flow together, signifying horror, shame and humiliation. In this film, however, the mother speaks for the symbolic, identifying with an order which has defined women's sexuality as the source of all evil and menstruation as the sign of sin. The horror film's obsession with blood, particularly the bleeding body of woman, where her body is transformed into the 'gaping wound', suggests that castration anxiety is a central concern of the horror film – particularly the slasher sub-genre. Woman's body is slashed and mutilated, not only to signify her own castrated state, but also the possibility of castration for the male. In the guise of a 'madman' he enacts on her body the one act he most fears for himself, transforming her entire body into a bleeding wound.

Kristeva's semiotic posits a pre-verbal dimension of language which relates to sounds and tone and to direct expression of the drives and physical contact with the maternal figure; 'it is dependent upon meaning, but in a way that is not that of *linguistic* signs nor of the *symbolic* order they found' (p 72). With the subject's entry into the symbolic, which separates the child from the mother, the maternal figure and the authority she signifies are repressed. Kristeva argues that it is the function of defilement rites, particularly those relating to menstrual and excremental objects, to point to the 'boundary' between the maternal semiotic authority and the paternal symbolic law.

Through language and within highly hierarchical religious institutions, man hallucinates partial 'objects' – witnesses to an archaic differentiation of the body on its way toward ego identity, which is also sexual identity. The defilement from which ritual protects us is neither sign nor matter. Within the rite that extracts it from repression and depraved desire, defilement is the translinguistic spoor of the most archaic boundaries of the self's clean and proper body. In that sense, if it is a jettisoned object, it is so from the

*mother. . . . By means of the symbolic institution of ritual, that is to say, by means of a system of ritual exclusions, the partial-object consequently becomes **scription** – an inscription of limits, an emphasis placed not on the (paternal) Law but on (maternal) Authority through the very signifying order. (p 73)*

Kristeva argues that, historically, it has been the function of religion to purify the abject but with the disintegration of these 'historical forms' of religion, the work of purification now rests solely with 'that catharsis par excellence called art' (p 17).

In a world in which the Other has collapsed, the aesthetic task – a descent into the foundations of the symbolic construct – amounts to retracing the fragile limits of the speaking being, closest to its dawn, to the bottomless 'primacy' constituted by primal repression. Through that experience, which is nevertheless managed by the Other, 'subject' and 'object' push each other away, confront each other, collapse, and start again – inseparable, contaminated, condemned, at the boundary of what is assimilable, thinkable: abject. (p 18)

This, I would argue, is also the central ideological project of the popular horror film – purification of the abject through a 'descent into the foundations of the symbolic construct'. In this way, the horror film brings about a confrontation with the abject (the corpse, bodily wastes, the monstrous-feminine) in order, finally, to eject the abject and re-draw the boundaries between the human and non-human. As a form of modern defilement rite, the horror film works to separate out the symbolic order from all that threatens its stability, particularly the mother and all that her universe signifies. In Kristeva's terms, this means separating out the maternal authority from paternal law.

As mentioned earlier, the central problem with Kristeva's theory is that it can be read in a prescriptive rather than a descriptive sense. This problem is rendered more acute by the fact that, although Kristeva distinguishes between the maternal and paternal figures, when she speaks of the subject who is being constituted, she never distinguishes between the child as male or female. Obviously, the female child's experience of the semiotic chora must be different from that of the male's experience in relation to the way it is spoken to, handled, etc. For the mother is already constituted as a gendered subject living within a patriarchal order and thus aware of the differences between the 'masculine' and the 'feminine' in relation to questions of desire. Thus, the mother might relate to a male child with a more acute sense of pride and pleasure. It is also possible that the child, depending on its gender, might find it more or less difficult to reject the mother for the father. Kristeva does not consider any of these issues. Nor does she distinguish between the relation of the adult male and female subject to rituals of defilement – for instance, menstruation taboos, where one imagines notions of the gendered subject would be of crucial importance. How, for instance, do women relate to rites of defilement, such as menstruation rites which

⁸ For a critique of *Powers of Horror* see Jennifer Stone, 'The Horrors of Power: A Critique of "Kristeva"', in F. Barker, P. Hulme, M. Iversen, D. Loxley (eds), *The Politics of Theory*, Colchester, University of Essex, 1983, pp. 38-48.

⁹ Sigmund Freud, 'From the History of an Infantile Neurosis', *Case Histories II*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, Harmondsworth, Pelican Freud Library, vol. 9, 1981, p. 294.

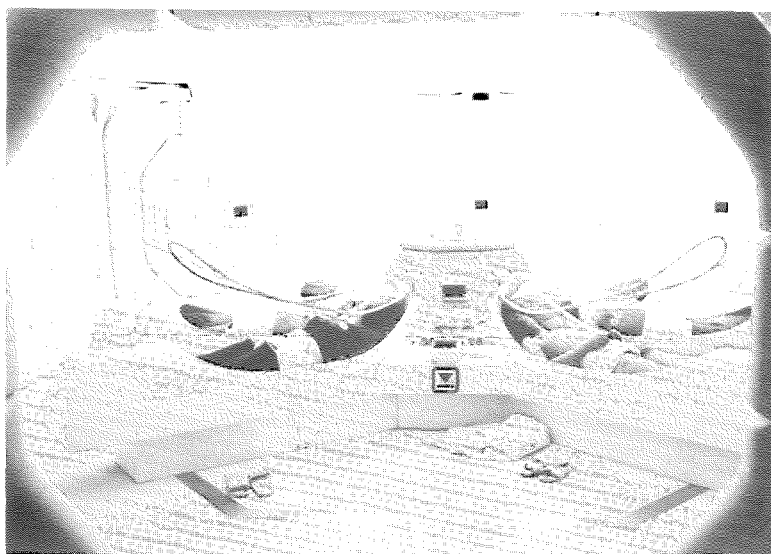
¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, 'On the Sexual Theories of Children', *On Sexuality*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, Pelican Freud Library, vol. 7, 1981, p. 198.

reflect so negatively on them? How do women within a specific cultural group see themselves in relation to taboos which construct their procreative functions as abject? Is it possible to intervene in the social construction of woman as abject? Or is the subject's relationship to the processes of abjectivity, as they are constructed within subjectivity and language, completely unchangeable? Is the abjection of women a precondition for the continuation of sociality? Kristeva never asks questions of this order. Consequently her theory of abjection could be interpreted as an apology for the establishment of sociality at the cost of women's equality. If, however, we read it as descriptive, as one which is attempting to explain the origins of patriarchal culture, then it provides us with an extremely useful hypothesis for an investigation of the representation of women in the horror film.⁸

IV

The science-fiction horror film *Alien* is a complex representation of the monstrous-feminine in terms of the maternal figure as perceived within a patriarchal ideology. She is there in the text's scenarios of the primal scene, of birth and death; she is there in her many guises as the treacherous mother, the oral sadistic mother, the mother as primordial abyss; and she is there in the film's images of blood, of the all-devouring vagina, the toothed vagina, the vagina as Pandora's box; and finally she is there in the chameleon figure of the alien, the monster as fetish-object of and for the mother. But it is the archaic mother, the reproductive/generative mother, who haunts the *mise-en-scène* of the film's first section, with its emphasis on different representations of the primal scene.

According to Freud, every child either watches its parents in the act of sexual intercourse or has phantasies about that act – phantasies which relate to the problem of origins. Freud left open the question of the cause of the phantasy but suggested that it may initially be aroused by 'an observation of the sexual intercourse of animals'.⁹ In his study of 'the Wolf Man', Freud argued that the child did not initially observe his parents in the act of sexual intercourse but that he witnessed the copulation of animals whose behaviour he then displaced onto his parents. In situations where the child actually witnesses sexual intercourse between its parents, Freud argued that all children arrive at the same conclusion: 'They adopt what may be called a *sadistic view of coition*'.¹⁰ If the child perceives the primal scene as a monstrous act – whether in reality or phantasy – it may phantasise animals or mythical creatures as taking part in the scenario. Possibly the many mythological stories in which humans copulate with animals and other creatures (Europa and Zeus, Leda and the Swan) are reworkings of the primal scene narrative. The Sphinx, with her lion's body and woman's face, is an interesting figure in this context. Freud suggested that the Riddle of the Sphinx was probably a distorted version of the great riddle that faces all children – Where do babies come from? An extreme form of the primal phantasy is that of



Alien: the first birth scene, in which the astronauts emerge from their sleep pods in an antiseptic atmosphere.

'observing parental intercourse while one is still an unborn baby in the womb'¹¹.

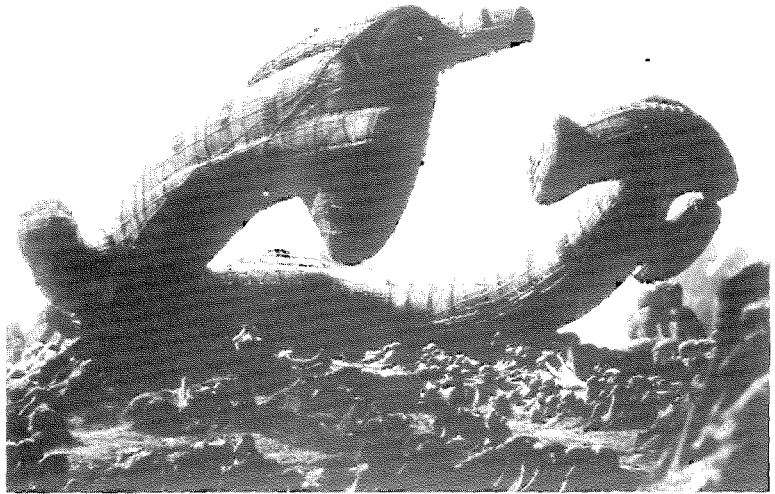
One of the major concerns of the sci-fi horror film (*Alien*, *The Thing*, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *Altered States*) is the reworking of the primal scene in relation to the representation of other forms of copulation and procreation. *Alien* presents various representations of the primal scene. Behind each of these lurks the figure of the archaic mother, that is, the image of the mother in her generative function – the mother as the origin of all life. This archaic figure is somewhat different from the mother of the semiotic chora, posed by Kristeva, in that the latter is the pre-Oedipal mother who exists in relation to the family and the symbolic order. The concept of the parthenogenic, archaic mother adds another dimension to the maternal figure and presents us with a new way of understanding how patriarchal ideology works to deny the 'difference' of woman in her cinematic representation.

The first birth scene occurs in *Alien* at the beginning, where the camera spectator explores the inner space of the mother-ship whose life support system is a computer aptly named – 'Mother'. This exploratory sequence of the inner body of the 'Mother' culminates with a long tracking shot down one of the corridors which leads to a womb-like chamber where the crew of seven are woken up from their protracted sleep by Mother's voice monitoring a call for help from a nearby planet. The seven astronauts emerge slowly from their sleep pods in what amounts to a re-birthing scene which is marked by a fresh, antiseptic atmosphere. In outer space, birth is a well controlled, clean, painless affair. There is no blood, trauma or terror. This scene could be interpreted as a primal fantasy in which the human subject is born fully developed – even copulation is redundant.

The second representation of the primal scene takes place when three

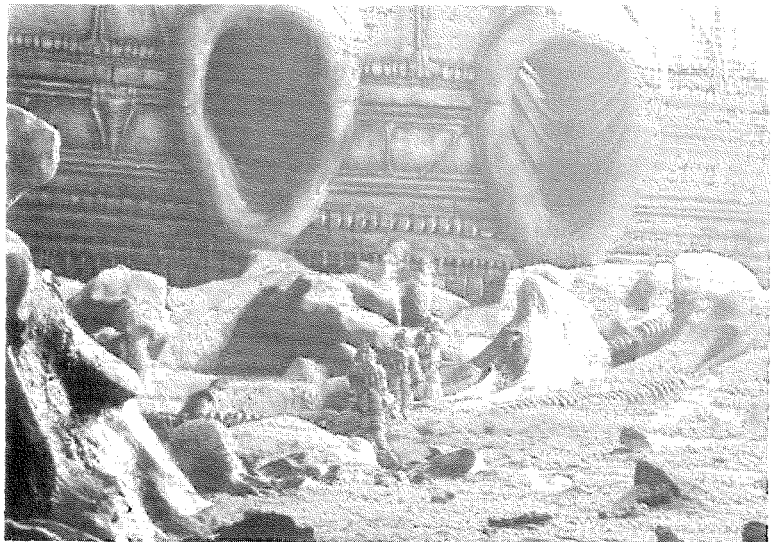
¹¹ Sigmund Freud, 'The Paths to the Formation of Symptoms', *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, Pelican Freud Library, vol 1, 1961, p 417.

Alien: the open 'legs' of the unknown space-ship.



of the crew enter the body of the unknown space-ship through a 'vaginal' opening: the ship is shaped like a horseshoe, its curved sides like two long legs spread apart at the entrance. They travel along a corridor which seems to be made of a combination of inorganic and organic material – as if the inner space of this ship were alive. Compared to the atmosphere of the *Nostromo*, however, this ship is dark, dank and mysterious. A ghostly light glimmers and the sounds of their movements echo throughout the caverns. In the first chamber, the three explorers find a huge alien life form which appears to have been dead for a long time. Its bones are bent outward as if it exploded from the inside. One of the trio, Kane,

Alien: crew members enter the ship through a 'vaginal' opening.



is lowered down a shaft into the gigantic womb-like chamber in which rows of eggs are hatching. Kane approaches one of the eggs; as he touches it with his gloved hand it opens out, revealing a mass of pulsating flesh. Suddenly, the monstrous thing inside leaps up and attaches itself to Kane's helmet, its tail penetrating Kane's mouth in order to fertilise itself inside his stomach. Despite the warnings of Ripley, Kane is taken back on board the *Nostromo* where the alien rapidly completes its gestation processes inside Kane.

This representation of the primal scene recalls Freud's reference to an extreme primal scene fantasy where the subject imagines travelling back inside the womb to watch her/his parents having sexual intercourse, perhaps to watch her/himself being conceived. Here, three astronauts explore the gigantic, cavernous, malevolent womb of the mother. Two members of the group watch the enactment of the primal scene in which



Alien: Kane approaches the rows of eggs in the womb-like chamber.

Kane is violated in an act of phallic penetration – by the father or phallic mother? Kane himself is guilty of the strongest transgression; he actually peers into the egg/womb in order to investigate its mysteries. In so doing, he becomes a 'part' of the primal scene, taking up the place of the mother, the one who is penetrated, the one who bears the offspring of the union. The primal scene is represented as violent, monstrous (the union is between human and alien), and is mediated by the question of incestuous desire. All re-stagings of the primal scene raise the question of incest, as the beloved parent (usually the mother) is with a rival. The first birth scene, where the astronauts emerge from their sleep pods, could be viewed as a representation of incestuous desire *par excellence*: the father is completely absent; here, the mother is sole parent and sole life-support.

From this forbidden union, the monstrous creature is born. But man, not woman, is the 'mother' and Kane dies in agony as the alien gnaws its

¹² Daniel Dervin argues that this structure does deserve the status of a convention. For a detailed discussion of the primal scene phantasy in various film genres, see his 'Primal Conditions and Conventions: The Genres of Comedy and Science Fiction', *Film/ Psychology Review*, Winter-Spring 1980, pp 115-147.

¹³ Sigmund Freud, 'Female Sexuality', *On Sexuality*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, Pelican Freud Library, vol 7, 1981, p 373.

¹⁴ For a discussion of the relation between 'the semiotic' and the Lacanian 'imaginary' see Jane Gallop, *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: The Daughter's Seduction*, London, Macmillan Press, 1983, pp 124-5.

way through his stomach. The birth of the alien from Kane's stomach plays on what Freud described as a common misunderstanding that many children have about birth, that is, that the mother is somehow impregnated through the mouth – she may eat a special food – and the baby grows in her stomach from which it is also born. Here, we have a third version of the primal scene.

A further version of the primal scene – almost a convention¹² of the science fiction film – occurs when smaller crafts or bodies are ejected from the mother-ship into outer space; although sometimes the ejected body remains attached to the mother-ship by a long life-line or umbilical chord. This scene is presented in two separate ways: one when Kane's body, wrapped in a white shroud, is ejected from the mother-ship; and the second, when the small space capsule, in which Ripley is trying to escape from the alien, is expelled from the underbelly of the mother-ship. In the former, the 'mother's' body has become hostile; it contains the alien whose one purpose is to kill and devour all of Mother's children. In the latter birth scene the living infant is ejected from the malevolent body of the 'mother' to avoid destruction; in this scenario, the 'mother's' body explodes at the moment of giving birth.

Although the 'mother' as a figure does not appear in these sequences – nor indeed in the entire film – her presence forms a vast backdrop for the enactment of all the events. She is there in the images of birth, the representations of the primal scene, the womb-like imagery, the long winding tunnels leading to inner chambers, the rows of hatching eggs, the body of the mother-ship, the voice of the life-support system, and the birth of the alien. She is the generative mother, the pre-phallic mother, the being who exists prior to knowledge of the phallus.

V

In explaining the difficulty he had in uncovering the role of the mother in the early development of infants, Freud complained of the almost 'prehistoric' remoteness of this 'Minoan-Mycenaean' stage:

*Everything in the sphere of this first attachment to the mother seemed to me so difficult to grasp in analysis – so grey with age and shadowy and almost impossible to revivify – that it was as if it had succumbed to an especially inextinguishable repression.*¹³

Just as the Oedipus complex tends to hide the pre-Oedipal phase in Freudian theory, the figure of the father, in the Lacanian re-writing of Freud, obscures the mother-child relationship of the imaginary. In contrast to the maternal figure of the Lacanian imaginary, Kristeva posits another dimension to the mother – she is associated with the pre-verbal or the semiotic and as such tends to disrupt the symbolic order.¹⁴

I think it is possible to open up the mother-question still further and posit an even more archaic maternal figure, to go back to mythological

narratives of the generative, parthenogenetic mother – that ancient archaic figure who gives birth to all living things. She exists in the mythology of all human cultures as the Mother-Goddess who alone created the heavens and earth. In China she was known as Nu Kwa, in Mexico as Coatlicue, in Greece as Gaia (literally meaning 'earth') and in Sumer as Nammu. In 'Moses and Monotheism', Freud attempted to account for the historical existence of the great mother-goddesses.

*It is likely that the mother-goddesses originated at the time of the curtailment of the matriarchy, as a compensation for the slight upon the mothers. The male deities appear first as sons beside the great mothers and only later clearly assume the features of father-figures. These male gods of polytheism reflect the conditions during the patriarchal age.*¹⁵

Freud proposed that human society developed through stages from patriarchy to matriarchy and finally back to patriarchy. During the first, primitive people lived in small hordes, each one dominated by a jealous, powerful father who possessed all the females of the group. One day the sons, who had been banished to the outskirts of the group, overthrew the father – whose body they devoured – in order to secure his power and to take his women for themselves. Overcome by guilt, they later attempted to revoke the deed by setting up a totem as a substitute for the father and by renouncing the women whom they had liberated. The sons were forced to give up the women, whom they all wanted to possess, in order to preserve the group which otherwise would have been destroyed as the sons fought amongst themselves. In 'Totem and Taboo', Freud suggests that here 'the germ of the institution of matriarchy'¹⁶ may have originated. Eventually, however, this new form of social organisation, constructed upon the taboo against murder and incest, was replaced by the re-establishment of a patriarchal order. He pointed out that the sons had:

*... thus created out of their filial sense of guilt the two fundamental taboos of totemism, which for that very reason inevitably corresponded to the two repressed wishes of the Oedipus complex.*¹⁷

Freud's account of the origins of patriarchal civilisation is generally regarded as mythical. Lévi-Strauss points out that it is 'a fair account not of the beginnings of civilisation, but of its present state' in that it expresses 'in symbolical form an inveterate fantasy' – the desire to murder the father and possess the mother.¹⁸ In her discussion of 'Totem and Taboo', Kristeva argues that a 'strange slippage' (p 56) has taken place in that although Freud points out that morality is founded on the taboos of murder and incest his argument concentrates on the first to the virtual exclusion of the latter. Yet, Kristeva argues, the 'woman – or mother – image haunts a large part of that book and keeps shaping its background', (p 57). She poses the question:

¹⁵ Sigmund Freud, 'Moses and Monotheism', in James Strachey (ed), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol 23, op cit, p 83.

¹⁶ Sigmund Freud, 'Totem and Taboo', *The Origins of Religion*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, Pelican Freud Library, vol 13, 1985, p 206.

¹⁷ *ibid*, p 205.

¹⁸ Lévi-Strauss, quoted in Georges Bataille, *Death and Sensuality: A Study of Eroticism and the Taboo*, New York, Walker and Company, 1962, p 200.

¹⁹ Jacques Lacan, in Anthony Wilden (ed), *The Language of The Self*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins, 1970, p 126.

²⁰ Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire XX*, p 34, translated in Stephen Heath, 'Difference', *Screen*, Autumn 1978, vol 19 no 3, p 59.

²¹ Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire II*, p 196, translated in Stephen Heath, *op cit*, p 54.

Could the sacred be, whatever its variants, a two-sided formation? One aspect founded by murder and the social bond made up of a murderer's guilt-ridden atonement, with all the projective mechanisms and obsessive rituals that accompany it; and another aspect, like a lining, more secret and invisible, non-representable, oriented toward those uncertain spaces of unstable identity, toward the fragility – both threatening and fusional – of the archaic dyad, toward the non-separation of subject/object, on which language has no hold but one woven of fright and repulsion? (pp 57-8)

From the above, it is clear that the figure of the mother in both the history of human sociality and in the history of the individual subject poses immense problems. Freud attempts to account for the existence of the mother-goddess figure by posing a matriarchal period in historical times while admitting that everything to do with the 'first attachment to the mother' is deeply repressed – 'grey with age and shadowy and almost impossible to revivify'. Nowhere does he attempt to specify the nature of this 'matriarchal period' and the implications of this for his own psycho-analytical theory, specifically his theory of the Oedipus complex which, as Lacan points out, 'can only appear in a patriarchal form in the institution of the family'¹⁹. Kristeva criticises Freud for failing to deal adequately with incest and the mother-question while using the same mystifying language to refer to the mother; the other aspect of the sacred is 'like a lining', 'secret and invisible', 'non-representable'. In his re-reading of Freud, Lacan mystifies the figure of woman even further: '...the woman is not-all, there is always something with her which eludes discourse'²⁰. Further, all three writers conflate the archaic mother with the mother of the dyadic and triadic relationship. They refer to her as a 'shadowy' figure (Freud); as 'non-representable' (Kristeva); as the 'abyss of the female organ from which all life comes forth' (Lacan²¹), then make no clear attempt to distinguish this aspect of the maternal imago from the protective/suffocating mother of the pre-Oedipal or the mother as object of sexual jealousy and desire as she is represented in the Oedipal configuration.

The maternal figure constructed within/by the writings of Freud, Lacan and Kristeva is inevitably the mother of the dyadic or triadic relationship – although the latter figure is more prominent. Even when she is represented as the mother of the imaginary, of the dyadic relationship, she is still constructed as the *pre-Oedipal* mother, that is, as a figure about to 'take up a place' in the symbolic – as a figure always in relation to the father, the representative of the phallus. Without her 'lack', he cannot signify its opposite – lack of a lack or presence. But if we posit a more archaic dimension to the mother – the mother as originating womb – we can at least begin to talk about the maternal figure as *outside* the patriarchal family constellation. In this context, the mother-goddess narratives can be read as primal-scene narratives in which the mother is the sole parent. She is also the subject, not the object, of narrativity.

For instance in the 'Spider Woman' myth of the North American Indians, there was only the Spider Woman, who spun the universe into

existence and then created two daughters from whom all life flowed. She is also the Thought Woman or Wise Woman who knows the secrets of the universe. Within the Oedipus narrative, however, she becomes the Sphinx, who also knows the answers to the secret of life but here her situation has been changed. She is no longer the subject of the narrative; she has become the object of the narrative of the male hero. After he has solved her riddle, she will destroy herself. The Sphinx is an ambiguous figure; she knows the secret of life and is thereby linked to the mother-goddess but her name, which is derived from 'sphincter', suggests she is the mother of toilet training, the pre-Oedipal mother who must be repudiated by the son so that he can take up his proper place in the symbolic. It is interesting that Oedipus has always been seen to have committed two horrific crimes: patricide and incest. But his encounter with the Sphinx, which leads to her death, suggests he is also responsible for another horrific crime—that of matricide. For the Sphinx, like the Medusa, is a mother-goddess figure; they are both variants of the same mythological mother who gave birth to all life. Lévi-Strauss has argued that a major issue in the Oedipus myth is the problem of whether or not man is born from woman. This myth is also central to *Alien*:

*Although the problem obviously cannot be solved, the Oedipus myth provides a kind of logical tool which relates the original problem—born from one or born from two?—to the derivative problem: born from different or born from same?*²²

The Medusa, whose head, according to Freud, signifies the female genitals in their terrifying aspect, also represents the procreative function of woman. The blood which flows from her severed head gives birth to Pegasus and Chrysaor. Although Neptune is supposed to be the father, the nature of the birth once again suggests the parthenogenetic mother. In *Alice Doesn't*, Teresa de Lauretis argues that:

*... to say that narrative is the production of Oedipus is to say that each reader—male or female—is constrained and defined within the two positions of a sexual difference thus conceived: male-hero-human, on the side of the subject; and female-obstacle-boundary-space, on the other.*²³

If we apply her definition to narratives which deal specifically with the archaic mother—such as the Oedipus and Perseus myths—we can see that the 'obstacle' relates specifically to the question of origins and is an attempt to repudiate the idea of woman as the source of life, woman as sole parent, woman as archaic mother.

In his article, *Fetishism in the Horror Film*, Roger Dadoun also refers to this archaic maternal figure. He describes her as:

... a maternal thing situated on this side of good and evil, on this side of all organized form, on this side of all events—a totalizing, oceanic mother, a 'mysterious and profound unity', arousing in the subject the anguish of fusion and of dissolution; the mother prior to the uncovering of the essential

²² Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (trans C Jacobson and BG Schoepf), New York, Doubleday, 1976, p 212.

²³ Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*, Indiana University Press, 1984, p 121.

²⁴ Roger Dadoun, 'Fetishism in the Horror Film', *Enclitic*, vol 1 no 2, 1977, pp 55-56.

²⁵ Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', in James Strachey (ed), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol 17, op cit, p 245.

²⁶ *ibid*, p 225.

*béance [gap], of the pas-de-phallus, the mother who is pure fantasm, in the sense that she is posed as an omnipresent and all-powerful totality, an absolute being, only in the intuition – she does not have a phallus – which deposes her. . . .*²⁴

Dadoun places emphasis on her 'totalizing, oceanic' presence. I would stress her archaism in relation to her generative powers – the mother who gives birth all by herself, the original parent, the godhead of all fertility and the origin of procreation. What is most interesting about the mythological figure of woman as the source of all life (a role taken over by the male god of monotheistic religions) is that, within patriarchal signifying practices, particularly the horror film, she is reconstructed and represented as a *negative* figure, one associated with the dread of the generative mother seen only as the abyss, the monstrous vagina, the origin of all life threatening to re-absorb what it once birthed. Kristeva also represents her in this negative light:

Fear of the uncontrollable generative mother repels me from the body; I give up cannibalism because abjection (of the mother) leads me toward respect for the body of the other, my fellow man, my brother. (pp 78-79)

In this context it is interesting to note that Freud linked the womb to the *unheimlich*, the uncanny:

*It often happens that neurotic men declare that they feel that there is something uncanny about the female genital organs. This *unheimlich* place, however, is the entrance to the former *Heim* [home] of all human beings, to the place where each one of us lived once upon a time and in the beginning. There is a joke saying that 'Love is home-sicknesses'; and whenever a man dreams of a place or a country and says to himself, while he is still dreaming: 'this place is familiar to me, I've been here before', we may interpret the place as being his mother's genitals or her body.²⁵*

Freud also supported, and elaborated upon, Schelling's definition of the uncanny as 'something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light'²⁶. In horror films such as *Alien*, we are given a representation of the female genitals and the womb as uncanny – horrific objects of dread and fascination. Unlike the mythological mother-narratives, here the archaic mother, like the Sphinx and the Medusa, is seen only in a negative light. But the central characteristic of the archaic mother is her total dedication to the generative, procreative principle. She is outside morality and the law. Ash's eulogy to the alien is a description of this mother:

I admire its purity; a survivor unclouded by conscience, remorse or delusions of morality.

Clearly, it is difficult to separate out completely the figure of the archaic mother, as defined above, from other aspects of the maternal figure –

the maternal authority of Kristeva's semiotic, the mother of Lacan's imaginary, the phallic woman, the castrated woman. While the different figures signify quite separate things about the monstrous-feminine, as constructed in the horror film, each one is also only part of the whole – a different aspect of the maternal figure. At times the horrific nature of the monstrous-feminine is totally dependent on the merging together of all aspects of the maternal figure into one – the horrifying image of woman as archaic mother, phallic woman and castrated body represented as a single figure within the horror film. However, the archaic mother is clearly present in two distinct ways in the horror film.

(i) The archaic mother – constructed as a negative force – is represented in her phantasmagoric aspects in many horror texts, particularly the sci-fi horror film. We see her as the gaping, cannibalistic bird's mouth in *The Giant Claw*; the terrifying spider of *The Incredible Shrinking Man*; the toothed vaginal/womb of *Jaws*; and the fleshy, pulsating, womb of *The Thing* and *the Poltergeist*. What is common to all of these images of horror is the voracious maw, the mysterious black hole which signifies female genitalia as a monstrous sign which threatens to give birth to equally horrific offspring as well as threatening to incorporate everything in its path. This is the generative archaic mother, constructed within patriarchal ideology as the primeval 'black hole'. This, of course, is also the hole which is opened up by the absence of the penis; the horrifying sight of the mother's genitals – proof that castration can occur.

However, in the texts cited above, the emphasis is not on castration; rather it is the gestating, all-devouring womb of the archaic mother which generates the horror. Nor are these images of the womb constructed in relation to the penis of the father. Unlike the female genitalia, the womb cannot be constructed as a 'lack' in relation to the penis. The womb is not the site of castration anxiety. Rather, the womb signifies 'fullness' or 'emptiness' but always it is its *own point of reference*. This is why we need to posit a more archaic dimension to the mother. For the concept of the archaic mother allows for a notion of the feminine which does not depend for its definition on a concept of the masculine. The term 'archaic mother' signifies woman as sexual difference. In contrast the maternal figure of the pre-Oedipal is always represented in relation to the penis – the phallic mother who later becomes the castrated mother. Significantly, there is an attempt in *Alien* to appropriate the procreative function of the mother, to represent a man giving birth, to deny the mother as signifier of sexual difference – but here birth can exist only as the other face of death.

(ii) The archaic mother is present in all horror films as the blackness of extinction – death. The desires and fears invoked by the image of the archaic mother, as a force that threatens to re-incorporate what it once gave birth to, are always there in the horror text – all pervasive, all encompassing – because of the constant presence of death. The desire to return to the original oneness of things, to return to the mother/womb, is primarily a desire for non-differentiation. If, as Georges Bataille²⁷

²⁷ Georges Bataille, *Death and Sensuality: A Study of Eroticism and the Taboo*, op cit.

argues, life signifies discontinuity and separateness, and death signifies continuity and non-differentiation, then the desire for and attraction of death suggests also a desire to return to the state of original oneness with the mother. As this desire to merge occurs after differentiation, that is after the subject has developed as separate, autonomous self, then it is experienced as a form of psychic death. In this sense, the confrontation with death as represented in the horror film, gives rise to a terror of self-disintegration, of losing one's self or ego—often represented cinematically by a screen which becomes black, signifying the obliteration of self, the self of the protagonist in the film and the spectator in the cinema. This has important consequences for the positioning of the spectator in the cinema.

One of the most interesting structures operating in the screen-spectator relationship relates to the sight/site of the monstrous within the horror text. In contrast to the conventional viewing structures working within other variants of the classic text, the horror film does not constantly work to suture the spectator into the viewing processes. Instead, an unusual phenomenon arises whereby the suturing processes are momentarily undone while the horrific image on the screen challenges the viewer to run the risk of continuing to look. Here, I refer to those moments in the horror film when the spectator, unable to stand the images of horror unfolding before his/her eyes, is forced to look away, to not-look, to look anywhere but at the screen. Strategies of identification are temporarily broken, as the spectator is constructed in the place of horror, the place where the sight/site can no longer be endured, the place where pleasure in looking is transformed into pain and the spectator is punished for his/her voyeuristic desires. Perhaps, this should be referred to as a *fifth* look operating alongside the other 'looks' which have been theorised in relation to the screen-spectator relationship.²⁸

Confronted by the sight of the monstrous, the viewing subject is put into crisis—boundaries, designed to keep the abject at bay, threaten to disintegrate, collapse. According to Lacan, the self is constituted in a process which he called the 'mirror phase', in which the child perceives its own body as a unified whole in an image it receives from outside itself. Thus, the concept of identity is a structure which depends on identification with another. Identity is an imaginary construct, formed in a state of alienation, grounded in mis-recognition. Because the self is constructed on an illusion, Lacan argues that it is always in danger of regressing:

*Here we see the ego, in its essential resistance to the elusive process of Becoming, to the variations of Desire. This illusion of unity, in which a human being is always looking forward to self-mastery, entails a constant danger of sliding back again into the chaos from which he started; it hangs over the abyss of a dizzy Assent in which one can perhaps see the very essence of Anxiety.*²⁹

²⁸ For a discussion of cinema and the structures of the 'look' see Paul Willemen, 'Letter To John', *Screen*, Summer 1980, vol 21 no 2, pp 53-66.

²⁹ Jacques Lacan, 'Some Reflections on the Ego', *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, vol 24, 1953, p 15.

The horror film puts the viewing subject's sense of a unified self into crisis, specifically in those moments when the image on the screen becomes too threatening or horrific to watch, when the abject threatens to draw the viewing subject to the place 'where meaning collapses', the place of death. By not-looking, the spectator is able momentarily to withdraw identification from the image on the screen in order to reconstruct the boundary between self and screen and reconstitute the 'self' which is threatened with disintegration. This process of reconstitution of the self is reaffirmed by the conventional ending of the horror narrative in which the monster is usually 'named' and destroyed.³⁰

Fear of losing oneself and one's boundaries is made more acute in a society which values boundaries over continuity and separateness over sameness. Given that death is represented in the horror film as a threat to the self's boundaries, symbolised by the threat of the monster, death images are most likely to cause the spectator to look away, to not-look. Because the archaic mother is closely associated with death in its negative aspects, her presence is marked negatively within the project of the horror film. Both signify a monstrous obliteration of the self and both are linked to the demonic. Again, Kristeva presents a negative image of the maternal figure in her relationship to death:

What is the demoniacal—an inescapable, repulsive, and yet nurtured abomination? The fantasy of an archaic force, on the near side of separation, unconscious, tempting us to the point of losing our differences, our speech, our life; to the point of aphasia, decay, opprobrium, and death? (p 107)

Alien collapses the image of the threatening archaic mother, signifying woman as 'difference', into the more recognised figure of the pre-Oedipal mother³¹; this occurs in relation to two images of the monstrous-feminine: the oral-sadistic mother and the phallic mother. Kane's transgressive disturbance of the egg/womb initiates a transformation of its latent aggressivity into an active, phallic enemy. The horror then played out can be read in relation to Kristeva's concept of the semiotic chora. As discussed earlier, Kristeva argues that the maternal body becomes the site of conflicting desires (the semiotic chora). These desires are constantly staged and re-staged in the workings of the horror narrative where the subject is left alone, usually in a strange hostile place, and forced to confront an unnameable terror, the monster. The monster represents both the subject's fears of being alone, of being separate from the mother, and the threat of annihilation—often through re-incorporation. As oral-sadistic mother, the monster threatens to re-absorb the child she once nurtured. Thus, the monster, like the abject, is ambiguous; it both repels and attracts.

In *Alien*, each of the crew members comes face to face with the alien in a scene whose *mise-en-scène* is coded to suggest a monstrous, malevolent maternal figure. They watch with fascinated horror as the baby alien gnaws its way through Kane's stomach; Dallas, the captain, encounters the alien after he has crawled along the ship's enclosed, womb-like air

³⁰ For a discussion of the relationship between the female spectator, structures of looking and the horror film see Linda Williams, 'When The Woman Looks', in Mary Anne Doane, Patricia Mellencamp and Linda Williams (eds), *Re-Vision*, American Film Institute Monograph Series, vol 3, University Publications of America, 1984.

³¹ Dadoun refers to a similar process when he speaks of the displacement of the large 'omnipresent mother' into the small 'occulted mother', op cit, p 55.

ducts; and the other three members are cannibalised in a frenzy of blood in scenes which emphasise the alien's huge razor-sharp teeth, signifying the monstrous oral-sadistic mother. Apart from the scene of Kane's death, all the death sequences occur in dimly-lit, enclosed, threatening spaces reminiscent of the giant hatchery where Kane first encounters the pulsating egg. In these death sequences the terror of being abandoned is matched only by the fear of re-incorporation. This scenario, which enacts the conflicting desires at play in the semiotic chora, is staged within the body of the mother-ship, the vessel which the space-travellers initially trust, until 'Mother' herself is revealed as a treacherous figure programmed to sacrifice the lives of the crew in the interests of the Company.

The other face of the monstrous-feminine in *Alien* is the phallic mother. Freud argued that the male child could either accept the threat of castration, thus ending the Oedipus complex, or disavow it. The latter response requires the (male) child to mitigate his horror at the sight of the mother's genitals—proof that castration can occur—with a fetish object which substitutes for her missing penis. For him, she is still the phallic mother, the penis-woman. In 'Medusa's Head' Freud argued that the head with its hair of writhing snakes represented the terrifying genitals of the mother, but that this head also functioned as a fetish object.

*The hair upon the Medusa's head is frequently represented in works of art in the form of snakes, and these once again are derived from the castration complex. It is a remarkable fact that, however frightening they may be in themselves, they nevertheless serve actually as a mitigation of horror, for they replace the penis, the absence of which is the cause of horror.*³²

Freud noted that a display of the female genitals makes a woman 'unapproachable and repels all sexual desires'. He refers to the section in Rabelais which relates 'how the Devil took flight when the woman showed him her vulva'³³. Perseus' solution is to look only at a reflection, a mirror-image of her genitals. As with patriarchal ideology, his shield reflects an 'altered' representation, a vision robbed of its threatening aspects. The full difference of the mother is denied; she is constructed as other, displayed before the gaze of the conquering male hero, then destroyed.³⁴ The price paid is the destruction of sexual heterogeneity and repression of the maternal signifier. The fetishisation of the mother's genitals could occur in those texts where the maternal figure is represented in her phantasmagoric aspects as the gaping, voracious vagina/womb. Do aspects of these images work to mitigate the horror by offering a substitute for the penis?

Roger Dadoun argues very convincingly that the Dracula variant of the vampire movie is 'an illustration of the work of the fetish function'³⁵:

... against the primitive identification with the mother, a phallus; against the anguish of psychotic break-down, sexuality; against spatio-temporal

³² Sigmund Freud, 'Medusa's Head', op cit, p 105.

³³ *ibid*, p 106.

³⁴ For a fascinating discussion of the place of woman as monster in the Oedipal narrative see Teresa de Lauretis, op cit, chapter 5.

³⁵ Roger Dadoun, op cit, p 40.

*disorganization, a ritual—and this is what is fabricated, we could say, on the positive slopes of fetishism, a sexualized phallic object, it is as rigid and impressive as it is fragile and threatened, where we will perhaps have the pleasure of recognizing one of the familiar figures of horror film, Count Dracula.*³⁶

Dadoun argues that the archaic mother exists as a 'non-presence... signifying an extremely archaic mode of presence'³⁷. Signs of the archaic mother in the Dracula film are: the small, enclosed village; the pathway through the forest that leads like an umbilical chord to the castle; the central place of enclosure with its winding stairways, spider webs, dark vaults, worm-eaten staircases, dust and damp earth—'all elements which come back to the *imago* of the bad archaic mother'³⁸. At the centre of this, Dracula himself materialises. With his black cape, pointed teeth, rigid body—carried 'like an erect phallus'—piercing eyes and 'penetrating look'³⁹, he is the fetish form, 'a substitute of the maternal phallus'⁴⁰.

*It is clear, nevertheless, since the threat comes from the absent maternal phallus, that the principal defense is sex. The vampire, markedly fascinated by the maternal *pas-de-phallus* and identifying himself with the archaic mother for lack of having a phallus, becomes phallus; he transfers a default of *having* to the plan of an illusory *being*.*⁴¹

As he emerges in Dadoun's argument, the Dracula figure is very much acting on behalf of the mother—he desires to be the phallus for the mother. When he is finally penetrated by the stake, his heart is 'revealed as hollow, a gash, or a gaping wound—it is castration made flesh, blood and *béance*...' ⁴². However, it is possible that we could theorise fetishism differently by asking: Who is the fetish-object a fetish for? The male or female subject? In general, the fetishist is usually assumed to be male, although Freud did allow that female fetishism was a possibility.⁴³ The notion of female fetishism is much neglected although it is present in various patriarchal discourses.

In her article, 'Woman-Desire-Image', Mary Kelly argues that 'it would be a mistake to confine women to the realm of repression, excluding the possibility, for example, of female fetishism':

*When Freud describes castration fears for the woman, this imaginary scenario takes the form of losing her loved objects, especially her children; the child is going to grow up, leave her, reject her, perhaps die. In order to delay, disavow, that separation she has already in a way acknowledged, the woman tends to fetishise the child: by dressing him up, by continuing to feed him no matter how old he gets, or simply by having another 'little one'.*⁴⁴

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*⁴⁵, Freud discusses the way in which the doubling of a penis-symbol indicates an attempt to stave off castration anxieties. Juliet Mitchell refers to doubling as a sign of a female castration complex: 'We can see the significance of this for women, as

³⁶ *ibid*, p 42.

³⁷ *ibid*, p 53.

³⁸ *ibid*, p 64.

³⁹ *ibid*, p 57.

⁴⁰ *ibid*, p 56.

⁴¹ *ibid*, pp 59-60.

⁴² *ibid*, p 60.

⁴³ Sigmund Freud, 'An Outline of Psychoanalysis', in James Strachey (ed), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychoanalytic Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol 23, op cit, p 202: 'This abnormality, which may be counted as one of the perversions, is, as is well known, based on the patient (who is almost always male) not recognizing the fact that females have no penis...' (my emphasis).

⁴⁴ Mary Kelly, 'Woman-Desire-Image', *Desire*, London, Institute of Contemporary Arts 1984, p 31.

⁴⁵ Sigmund Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, Pelican Freud Library, vol 4, 1982.

⁴⁶ Juliet Mitchell,
*Psychoanalysis and
Feminism*,
Harmondsworth,
Penguin, 1974, p 84.

dreams of repeated number of children – “little ones” – are given the same import.⁴⁶ In this context, female fetishism represents an attempt by the female subject to continue to ‘have’ the phallus, to take up a ‘positive’ place in relation to the symbolic.

Female fetishism is clearly represented within many horror texts – as instances of patriarchal signifying practices – but only in relation to male fears and anxieties about women and the question: What do women want? (*The Birds*, *Cat People*, *Alien*, *The Thing*.) Women as yet do not speak their own ‘fetishistic’ desires within the popular cinema – if, indeed, women have such desires. The notion of female fetishism is represented in *Alien* in the figure of the monster. The creature is the mother’s phallus, attributed to the maternal figure by a phallogocentric ideology terrified at the thought that women might desire to have the phallus. The monster as fetish object is not there to meet the desires of the male fetishist, but rather to signify the monstrousness of woman’s desire to have the phallus.

In *Alien*, the monstrous creature is constructed as the phallus of the negative mother. The image of the archaic mother – threatening because it signifies woman as difference rather than constructed as opposition – is, once again, collapsed into the figure of the pre-Oedipal mother. By re-locating the figure of woman within an Oedipal scenario, her image can be recuperated and controlled. The womb, even if represented negatively, is a greater threat than the mother’s phallus. As phallic mother, woman is again represented as monstrous. What is horrific is her desire to cling to her offspring in order to continue to ‘have the phallus’. Her monstrous desire is concretised in the figure of the alien; the creature whose deadly mission is represented as the same as that of the archaic mother – to reincorporate and destroy all life.

If we consider *Alien* in the light of a theory of female fetishism, then the chameleon nature of the alien begins to make sense. Its changing appearance represents a form of doubling or multiplication of the phallus, pointing to the mother’s desire to stave off her castration. The alien is the mother’s phallus, a fact which is made perfectly clear in the birth scene where the infant alien rises from Kane’s stomach and holds itself erect, glaring angrily around the room, before screeching off into the depths of the ship. But the alien is more than a phallus; it is also coded as a toothed vagina, the monstrous-feminine as the cannibalistic mother. A large part of the ideological project of *Alien* is the representation of the maternal fetish object as an ‘alien’ or foreign shape. This is why the body of the heroine becomes so important at the end of the film.

Much has been written about the final scene, in which Ripley/Sigourney Weaver undresses before the camera, on the grounds that its voyeurism undermines her role as successful heroine. A great deal has also been written about the cat. Why does she rescue the cat and thereby risk her life, and the lives of Parker and Lambert, when she has previously been so careful about quarantine regulations? Again, satis-



Alien: Ripley as the reassuring mother with her 'little one'.

factory answers to these questions are provided by a phallogocentric concept of female fetishism. Compared to the horrific sight of the alien as fetish object of the monstrous feminine, Ripley's body is pleasurable and reassuring to look at. She signifies the 'acceptable' form and shape of woman. In a sense the monstrousness of woman, represented by Mother as betrayer (the computer/life support system), and Mother as the uncontrollable, generative, cannibalistic mother (the alien), is controlled through the display of woman as reassuring and pleasurable sign. The image of the cat functions in the same way; it signifies an acceptable, and in this context, a reassuring, fetish object for the 'normal' woman.⁴⁷ Thus, Ripley holds the cat to her, stroking it as if it were her 'baby', her 'little one'. Finally, Ripley enters her sleep pod, assuming a virginal repose. The nightmare is over and we are returned to the opening sequence of the film where birth was a pristine affair. The final sequence works, not only to dispose of the alien, but also to repress the nightmare image of the monstrous-feminine, constructed as a sign of abjection, within the text's patriarchal discourses.

Kristeva's theory of abjection, if viewed as description rather than pre-

⁴⁷ The double bird images of Hitchcock's *The Birds* function in the same way: the love birds signify an 'acceptable' fetish, the death birds a fetish of the monstrous woman.

⁴⁸ For an analysis of the horror film as a 'return of the repressed' see Robin Wood's articles: 'Return of the Repressed', *Film Comment*, July-August, 1978; and 'Neglected Nightmares', *Film Comment*, March-April, 1980.

scription, provides a productive hypothesis for an analysis of the monstrous-feminine in the horror film.⁴⁸ If we posit a more archaic dimension to the mother, we can see how this figure, as well as Kristeva's maternal authority of the semiotic, are both constructed as figures of abjection within the signifying practices of the horror film. We can see its ideological project as an attempt to shore up the symbolic order by constructing the feminine as an imaginary 'other' which must be repressed and controlled in order to secure and protect the social order. Thus, the horror film stages and re-stages a constant repudiation of the maternal figure.

But the feminine is not *per se* a monstrous sign; rather, it is constructed as such within a patriarchal discourse which reveals a great deal about male desires and fears but tells us nothing about feminine desire in relation to the horrific. When Norman Bates remarked to Marion Crane in *Psycho* that: 'Mother is not herself today', he was dead right. Mother wasn't herself. She was someone else. Her son - Norman.

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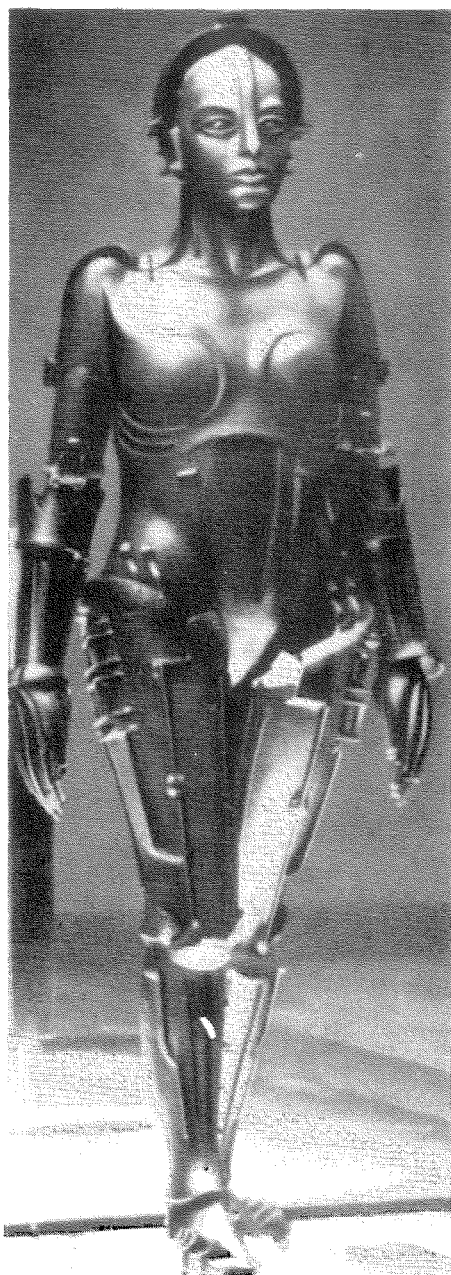
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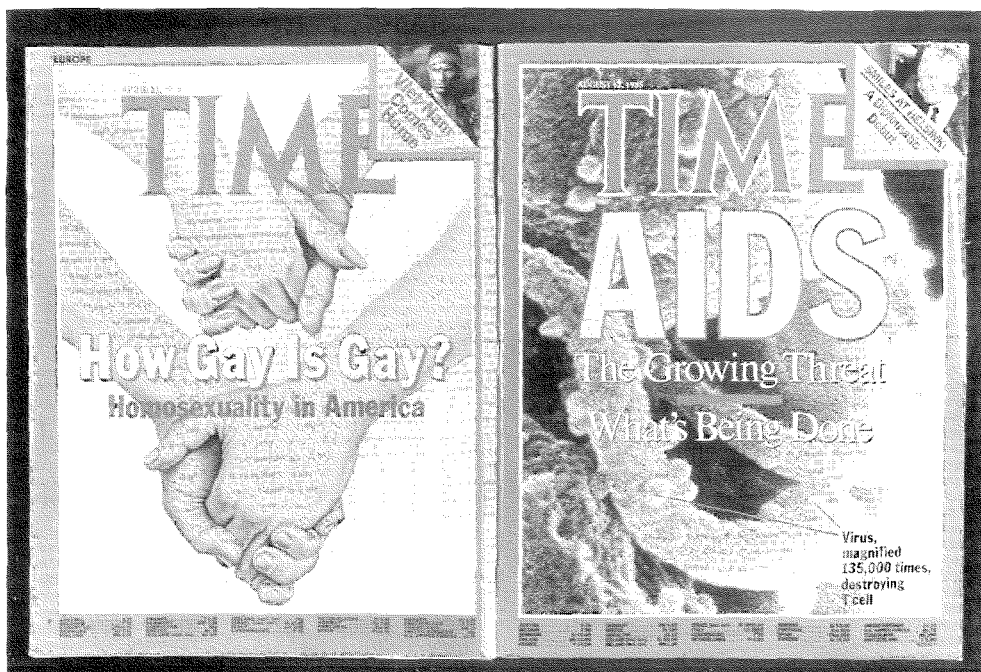
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Left, *Time*, April 23, 1979. Right, *Time*, August 12, 1985.

'The central issue then ... is not to determine whether one says yes or no to sex, whether one formulates prohibitions or permissions, whether one asserts its importance or denies its effects, or whether one refines the words one uses to designate it; but to account for the fact that it is spoken about, to discover who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak, the institutions which prompt people to speak about it and which store and distribute the things that are said. What is at issue, briefly, is the overall "discursive fact", the way in which sex is "put into discourse".'

— Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*,
Vintage Books, 1980.

'... in order for the reweaving of ideology to be truly invisible, the narrative is necessarily chiasmic in structure: that is, that the subject of the beginning of the narrative is different from the subject at the end, and that the two subjects cross each other in a rhetorical figure that conceals their discontinuity.'

— Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, Columbia University Press, 1985.

'The gay identity is no more a product of nature than any other sexual identity. It has developed through a complex history of definition and self-definition, and what recent histories of homosexuality have revealed clearly is that there is no necessary connection between sexual practices and sexual identity. But since the late 1960's, with the emergence of a gay movement and the huge expansion of the gay subcultures, coming out as a homosexual, that is openly assuming a gay identity, has been crucial to the public affirmation of homosexuality. Homosexual desire was no longer an unfortunate contingency of nature or fate; it was the positive basis of a sexual and, increasingly, social identity. AIDS implicitly threatened that, firstly by offering fearful consequences for being actively gay, but secondly, more subtly, by undermining the assumption that homosexuality is itself valid. AIDS, like nineteenth-century cancer, is seen as the disease of the sexually excessive just as "the homosexual" is seen as the embodiment of a particular sexual constitution.'

—Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality and Its Discontents*,
Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985.

'It is obvious that sexual love among persons of the same sex is a perversion, because, quite apart from any other arguments based upon ethics and morality, such a practice cannot result in procreation.... The greatest danger in homosexuality lies in the introduction of normal people to it. An act which will produce nothing but disgust in a normal individual may quite easily become more acceptable, until the time arrives when the normal person by full acceptance of the abnormal act becomes a pervert also.'

—Dr Jonathan Rodney, *A Handbook of Sex Knowledge*,
Paul Elek Limited, 1961.

'These perverts will frequently attempt to entice normal individuals to engage in perverted practices. This is particularly true in the case of young and impressionable people who might come under the influence of a pervert.... One homosexual can pollute a Government office.'

—US Senate, 81st Congress, 2nd Session, Committee on Expenditures in Executive Departments, *Employment of Homosexuals and Other Sex Perverts in Government* (Washington, DC, 1950).

'Any male person who, in public or private, commits, or is a party to the commission of, or procures or attempts to procure the commission by any male person of any act of gross indecency with another male person, shall be guilty of a misdemeanour, and being convicted thereof shall be liable at the discretion of the court to be imprisoned for any term not exceeding two years, with or without hard labour.'

—Criminal Law Amendment Act, 1885, section 11 (the 'Labouchère Amendment').



Left, *Daily Mirror*, August 18, 1983. Right, *The Sun*, August 20, 1983.

'It needs to be understood... that the widely-held popular association between male homosexuality and child molestation is not simply an ideological distortion of some pre-given and essential "truth" about all gay men. Otherwise one runs the risk of implicitly regarding homosexuality as a natural rather than a historical (and therefore mutable) category. For the association in question is demonstrably a fundamental aspect of the category of homosexuality as it was constructed by early sexologists around the turn of the century. Working within a crudely behaviourist framework, they concluded that there are in fact two distinct types of male homosexuality, equating these two types with highly reductive notions of sexual performance imported from their equally reductive picture of heterosexuality. Gay men were thus theorised... with reference to what were seen as the two basic sex-drives or instincts, the principles of femininity and masculinity.... Thus on the one hand there was the invert, the "natural" (e.g. incurable!) homosexual, emotionally and/or sexually attracted to his own sex. And on the other there was the "passive" and, it was generally assumed, basically heterosexual object of the invert's desires. Homosexuality was thus theorised in its very conception as a *relation* between predatory seducers and "innocent" victims. What is at stake here are the ways in which the invert/pervert hypothesis has been transmitted through the mass media of the 20th century, the ways in which homosexuality has been regarded as "newsworthy" and hence given a particular public profile. It is this profile or silhouette which constitutes the prevailing common-sense of the whole subject.'

— Simon Watney, 'On Gay Liberation', *Politics & Power* no 4,
Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981.

'IRONY: Irony consists in saying by a jeer or a joke what one thinks, or what one wants to be thought. It would seem to belong most particularly to frivolity, but rage and contempt also use it sometimes, to advantage; consequently it can enter into elevated speech and into the most serious subjects.'

— translated from Pierre Fontanier, *Les Figures du Discours*,
Flammarion, 1968.

'The unprecedented sensation caused by the Vere Street pillorying tempted newspapers to discuss a topic usually reported only tersely in the crime columns Some antiwar papers, like the Morning Chronicle, tried to exploit English xenophobia by ascribing homosexual conduct to foreign influence, calling it a crime "horrible to the nature of Englishmen" None of the papers expressed any sympathy for the battered men. Two thought "some of them . . . cannot survive the punishment; and should it prove their death, they will not only die unpitied, but justly execrated by every moral mind throughout the universe", the last phrase demonstrating the difficulty Regency England had in imagining standards different from its own. When editors did comment on the severity of the ordeal, it was to complain that it had not been sufficiently harsh. The Morning Advertiser thought "the annals of the pillory never furnished an instance in which popular vengeance was carried to greater extent". But this was not enough: it hoped "to see an Act passed in the ensuing Session (of Parliament) to make the attempt of this abominable offence capital". In effect, this would have made any homosexual who responded to a stranger's advances liable to hanging, should the stranger be a masquerading officer. The call for the extension of the death penalty was echoed by the Morning Post, the Observer, the Statesman, the News, and Bell's Weekly Messenger Foreign observers who did not share English prejudices were appalled, rather after the fashion of the Western press reporting Islamic severity in our own day.'

—Louis Crompton, *Byron and Greek Love*, Faber and Faber, 1985.

'Histories are not backdrops to set off the performance of images. They are scored into the paltry paper signs, in what they do and do not do, in what they encompass and exclude, in the ways they open onto or resist a repertoire of uses in which they can be meaningful and productive. Photographs are never "evidence" of history: they are themselves the historical.'

—John Tagg, 'The Burden of Representation', *Ten*.8 no 14, 1984.



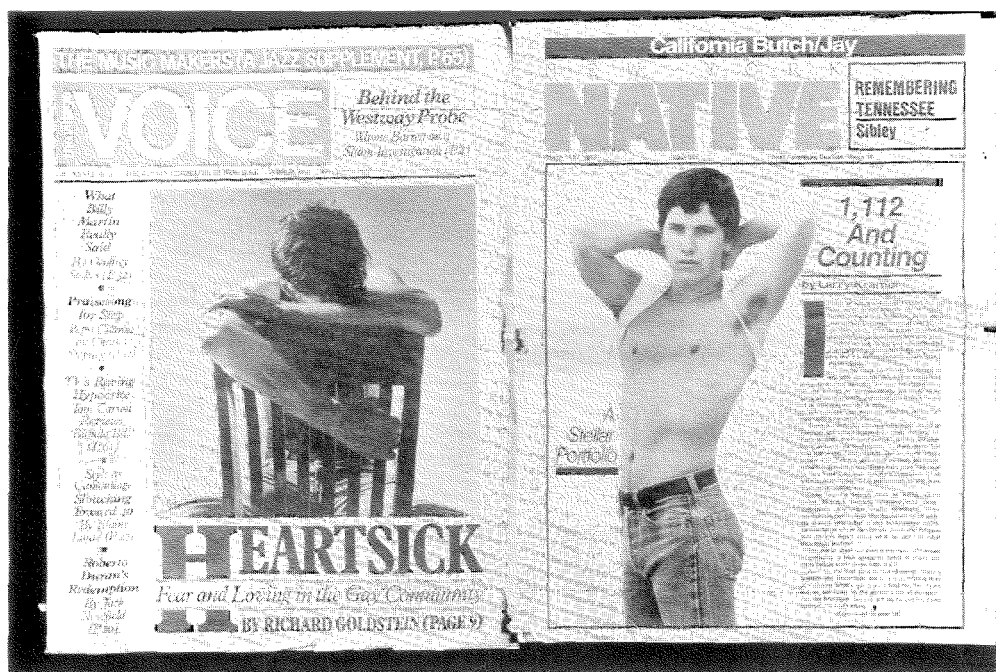
Daily Express, August 22, 1983.

'The rectum is a sexual organ, and it deserves the respect that a penis gets and a vagina gets. Anal intercourse is a central sexual activity, and it should be supported, it should be celebrated.... Everybody's too embarrassed to even contemplate this.... In fact, it's terribly important to actually do this, because anal intercourse has been the central activity for gay men and for some women for all of history. It's not going to go away because it's been declared unhealthy and unsound at this moment. It's *become* unhealthy, because the setting in which sex has occurred since the end of the '60's and over the '70's – the unprotected anal sex – has made it unhealthy. It's not the act itself, but the fact that it becomes a vehicle for infection.... That's an unfortunate hazard. What I'm trying to say is that we have to recognise what is hazardous, but at the same time, we shouldn't undermine an act that's important to celebrate just because it's under attack by the straight community. And this attack should not be joined by gay men.... You can't just write off anal intercourse and tell men they can no longer fuck, without giving them some kind of support. One should celebrate the act, but indicate that there is an epidemic which has stopped, if you like, this activity, an important part of one's life, and that, hopefully, there are circumstances in which unprotected anal intercourse will again become possible between two partners, in time. The risk-reduction stuff I've seen doesn't address this at all. It probably does a terrible thing to younger people who have misgivings about their own sexuality, who are confronted with all these terrible things. God knows, people find it hard enough to express themselves sexually.'

– Dr Joseph Sonnabend, 'Looking at AIDS in Totality: A Conversation',
New York Native, issue 129, October 7/13, 1985.



Left, *Der Spiegel*, August 12, 1985. Right, *People Weekly*, September 23, 1985.



Left, *The Village Voice*, June 28, 1983. Right, *New York Native*, March 14-27, 1983.

'Certain forms of sexuality, socially deviant forms—homosexuality especially—have long been promiscuously classified as 'sins' and 'diseases', so that you can be born with them, seduced into them and catch them, all at the same time. But today you are less likely to be condemned as immoral and more likely to be labelled sick. Disease sanctions govern and encode many of our responses to sex. It is this that makes the moral panic around AIDS... so important. It condenses a number of social stresses and throws unprecedented light on them. What is so very striking about the moral panic around 'AIDS' is that its victims are often being blamed for the illness.'

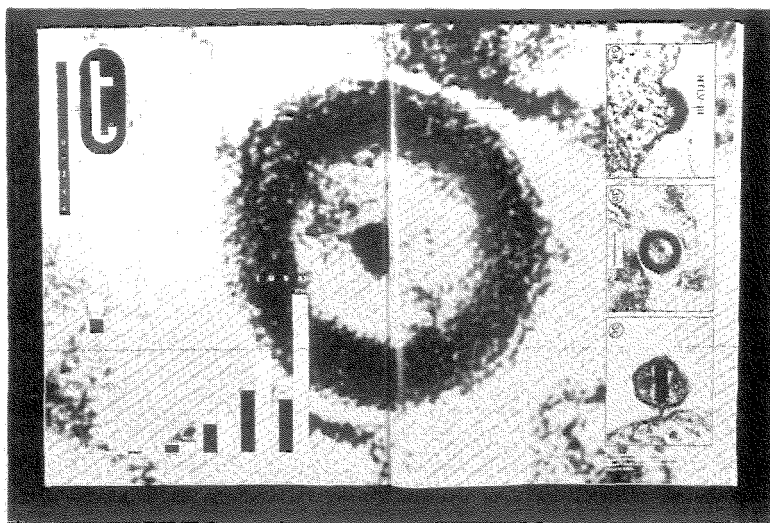
—Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality and Its Discontents*,
Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985.

'Another crisis coexists with the medical one. It has gone largely unexamined, even by the gay press. Like helpless mice we have peremptorily, almost inexplicably, relinquished the one power we so long fought for in constructing our modern gay community: the power to determine our own identity. And to whom have we relinquished it? The very authority we wrested it from in a struggle that occupied us for more than a hundred years: the medical profession.'

—Michael Lynch, 'Living with Kaposi's', *Body Politic* no 88,
November 1982.

'The relation between the subjugation of the voice in favour of the visible has important consequences for understanding the zeal with which the medical profession took up photography.'

—Roberta McGrath, 'Medical Police', *Ten.8* no 14, 1984.



The Face, May 1985.

'The Moral Majority view that it is a reward for two decades of increasing sexual license, a plague on gays, has disturbed deep-rooted fears. The AIDS scare has reinvested a fashionable, almost mundane homosexuality with taboo, rendered it marginal again. Despite the frank admissions and frantic gender-bending of pop stars in the not-so-gay Eighties, acceptance of homosexuality has now joined the other liberal causes in retreat... The spectre of the decade: Transmission Electron Micrograph of stages in the growth of Human T-Cell Leukemia Virus 111, identified as the cause of AIDS.'

– 'Panic', *The Face* no 61, May 1985.

'DISAVOWAL (DENIAL): Term used by Freud in the specific sense of a mode of defence which consists in the subject's refusing to recognise the reality of a traumatic perception... Inasmuch as disavowal affects *external reality*, Freud sees it as the first stage of psychosis, and he opposes it to repression: whereas the neurotic starts by repressing the demands of the id, the psychotic's first step is to disavow reality.'

– J Laplanche and J-B Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, Hogarth Press, 1973.

'What alone unites the diversity of sites in which photography operates is the social formation itself: the specific historical spaces for representation and practice which it constitutes. Photography as such has no identity. Its status as a technology varies with the power relations which invest it. Its nature as a practice depends on the institutions and agents which define it and set it to work. Its function as a mode of cultural production is tied to definite conditions of existence and its products are meaningful and legible only within the particular currencies they have. Its history has no unity. It is a flickering across a field of institutional spaces.'

– John Tagg, 'The Burden of Representation', *Ten*.8 no 14, 1984.



Photo (France), 1985.

'Ultimately, the question posed by venereal diseases that remain dormant for long periods of time is, whom can I trust? The answer clearly involves the establishment of intimacy and a bond of mutual concern between sexual partners. But that is hardly the same as suggesting that sexual activity, or sexuality per se, leads to illness. Yet, that is the animus underlying AIDS hysteria, the infectious agent that has suppressed our immunity from guilt . . . But in the New Right's moral agenda it is the inner world which must be purified on pain of death. In their reign of terror, I sense a return to the premodern idea that illness is not "an expression of the inner self" but a punishment and a sign . . . No one say how many formerly active homosexuals have chosen to be celibate, or how many lovers have traded vows of sexual exclusivity. That may seem like an improvement to some, but fidelity can hardly be regarded as a measure of commitment when it is inspired by the threat of illness; celibacy as an alternative to death is a painful, numbing choice. But sex alone is hardly a measure of the change AIDS has wrought in gay life. No one kisses any more, except in the manner of two French generals exchanging the *croix de guerre*. The rich palette of costumes and codes has given way to a cautious, undifferentiated prep. To dress for sex now seems an act of hubris, if not a mark of susceptibility to AIDS . . . The very process of "AIDS awareness" has created its own incipient pathology. No gay man can afford to ignore a bout of diarrhea or a blemish on the butt.'

—Richard Goldstein, 'Heartsick: Fear and Loving in the Gay Community', *The Village Voice*, June 28, 1983.

'HYSTERIA: Class of neuroses presenting a great diversity of clinical pictures. The two best isolated forms, from the point of view of symptoms, are *conversion hysteria*, in which the psychical conflict is expressed symbolically in somatic symptoms of the most varied kinds: they may be paroxysmic (e.g. emotional crises accompanied by theatricality) or more long-lasting (anaesthesias, hysterical paralyses, "lumps in the throat" etc.); and *anxiety hysteria*, where the anxiety is attached in more or less stable fashion to a specific external object (phobia).'

—J Laplanche and J-B Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, Hogarth Press, 1973.

Medicine

AIDS: A Growing Threat

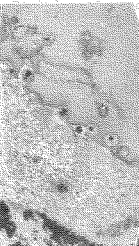
Now that the disease has come out of the clones, how far will it spread?

Journal of Management Education 26(7) 809-820
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4006 Lanth. 1. Thermal stability of the polymer system. *Anal.* Calcd. for $C_{10}H_{10}O_2$: C, 80.0%; H, 8.0%. Found: C, 79.5%; H, 7.8%.

the 1990s, the industry has been hit hard by a combination of factors, including a decline in the number of new entrants, a shift in the composition of the workforce, and a decline in the number of new entrants. The industry has been hit hard by a combination of factors, including a decline in the number of new entrants, a shift in the composition of the workforce, and a decline in the number of new entrants.

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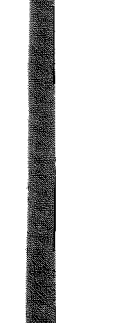
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Figure 1. The effect of the concentration of the polymer on the swelling ratio of the hydrogel.

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2022-2023 10 Steps to a Successful Career Interview



100

Time, August 12, 1985.

'There are many causes, none of which alone is sufficient to cause the disease. But if you add them all up, they interact in such a way to cumulatively, over a period of time, produce this disease. . . . The problem is that the doctors who've written about this disease are in medical centers. The people researching this disease, the physicians who write in the journals, just see men who have been referred to them. They know nothing about the setting, the overall environment, of the patient. They don't look at the disease in totality. In the 1950's, we had certain ideals or objectives in terms of the practice of medicine which I think we've lost. One of them was that we should understand our patients as a whole—we should understand their environment, all the settings, and all the contributions to illness, not simply look at an isolated bit of a body. To the extent that we've lost this, we've become confused. We're not really equipped to deal with the disease in its totality.'

–Dr Joseph Sonnabend, 'Looking at AIDS in Totality: A Conversation',
New York Native, issue 129, October 7/13, 1985.

'Scientific photography assumed the position of being merely a reflex of the real, and there was a general move to replace other means of visual record with the photograph. This reality was limited to the exterior of the body, because early emulsions were insensitive to red Thus favoured in photography were those diseases which erupted on the surface of the body such as skin diseases, burns, breaks and deformities. One of the earliest applications was the introduction of the "before and after" picture'

—Roberta McGrath, 'Medical Police', *Ten.* 8 no 14, 1984.



Photo (France), 1985.

'They appeal to the sadistic. Unlike most photographs which provide us with the familiar and known, they impinge on and break the fragile base upon which our lives are built—the disavowal of mortality, of disfigurement; a breakdown of barriers between the internal/external. We are shown the body cut open, flesh minus skin. . . . These are subjects which are marked, a split not only within the subject itself but one which divides one subject from another. This split is either healed and the subject allowed to return to the normal productive world in which her/his right to speak is returned or she/he dies within this space literally or in terms of a continued silence in the forms of confinement.'

— Roberta McGrath, 'Medical Police', *Ten.8* no 14, 1984.

'Once the photographer had arrived on site he assessed the situation in the light of the known requirements of the editor who wanted informational imagery with impact that approximated to the ideal picture for the ideal of the story. . . . The photo-journalist also had an idea of acceptable parameters for *news*. Action, impact, shock-value were framed, enhanced, created by typical composition: the key newsworthy figure or event was placed in the center of the frame, the cameraman aimed for a frontal position, sought dominant verticals, a linear-planar space, and an even surface pattern. . . .'

— John Taylor, 'Picturing the Past: Documentary Realism in the '30's', *Ten.8* no 11, 1983.



Above, *The Sun*, October 3, 1985. Below left, *Daily Mail*, October 3, 1985.

Below right, *The Star*, October 3, 1985.

'... to call homosexuals liars is equivalent to calling the resisters under a military occupation liars. It's like calling Jews "money lenders" when it was the only profession they were allowed to practice.'

— Michel Foucault, 'Sexual Choice, Sexual Act: An Interview',
Salmagundi 58/59, Fall/Winter 1982/83.

'Yesterday morning, Hepburn (late an Ensign) and White, the drummer, for an abominable offence, were executed before the Debtors' door, Newgate. White came out first; he seemed perfectly indifferent to his awful fate, and continued adjusting the frill of his shirt while he was viewing the surrounding populace. About two minutes after, Hepburn made his appearance, but was immediately surrounded by the clergyman, the executioner, his man, and others, in attendance. The executioner, at the same time, put the cap over Hepburn's face, which of course, prevented the people from having a view of him. White seemed to fix his eyes repeatedly on Hepburn. After a few moments prayer the miserable wretches were launched into eternity. A vast concourse of spectators attended. The duke of CUMBERLAND, Lord SEFTON, Lord YARMOUTH, and several other noblemen were in the Press-yard.'

— *The Times*, March 8, 1811.

'Subject to the gaze of the camera the body became the object of closest scrutiny, its surface continually examined for the signs of innate physical, mental and moral inferiority. From this science of corporeal semiotics there emerged new forms of knowledge about the individual and new ways of mapping depravity.'

—David Green, 'On Foucault: Disciplinary Power and Photography',
Camera no 32, Summer 1985.

"'Why can't you people just fuck less?' a friend admonishes. I have no easy answer, except to suggest that for many gay men, fucking satisfies a constellation of needs that are dealt with in straight society outside the arena of sex. For gay men, sex, that most powerful implement of attachment and arousal, is also an agent of communion, replacing an often hostile family and even shaping politics. It represents an ecstatic break with years of glances and guises, the furtive past we left behind. Straight people have no comparable experience, though it may seem so in memory. They are never called upon to deny desire, only to defer its consummation. For gay men, the promise of sex with anyone, at any time, is a signal gesture of liberation. It also happens to provide a fertile environment for the spread of disease. . . . "The most truthful way of regarding illness—and the healthiest way of being ill—is the most purified of, most resistant to, metaphoric thinking", Susan Sontag writes. I wish I could agree. I also wish sex could be stripped of its metaphors and reconstituted along the lines of pure pleasure. But I'm not convinced arousal can be sustained without fantasy, or fantasy composed with morality and myth. Since we are so vulnerable to the erotic potential of metaphor, how can we hope to be less susceptible when illness intersects with sex and death?"

—Richard Goldstein, 'Heartsick: Fear and Loving in the Gay Community',
The Village Voice, June 28, 1983.

'America is gripped with fear, loathing and hysteria over the relentless increase of the unexplained killer disease AIDS. What is terrifying its leaders is that the national mood is only a twitch away from focusing that hysteria onto a human target—the millions of openly homosexual men who until now have flaunted their "gayness" before the straight society. . . . When Rock Hudson admitted he had AIDS, the gay community exploited that fact with near joy. At last they had a public figure, a hero who was one of them. The biggest name in AIDS. The reality has been that it focused attention on AIDS and also on the causes of it. The gay parades are over. So too is public tolerance of a society that paraded its sexual deviation and demanded rights. The public is now demanding to live disease-free with the prime carriers in isolation.'

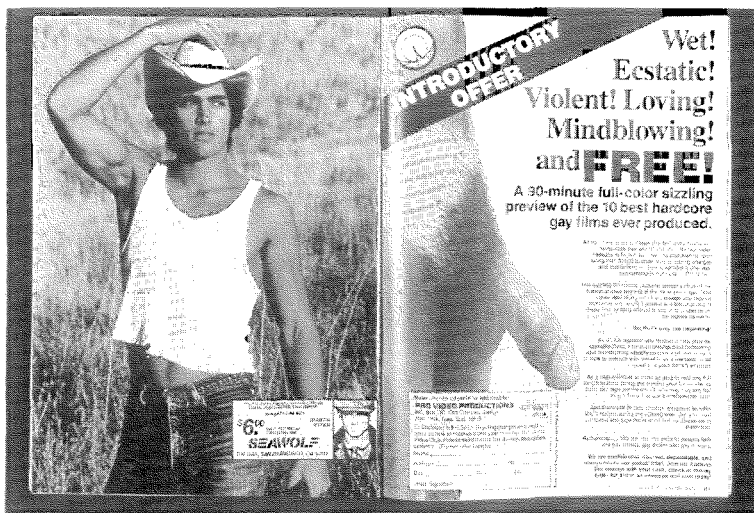
—George Gordon, 'Haunted by the Epidemic of Fear', *Daily Mail*,
October 3, 1985.

'Suddenly women and homosexuals find that they are being threatened, as a community of interests, by cervical cancer, Hepatitis B and AIDS, and resources are not being made available to these problems with sufficient speed or diligence. This is partly because these diseases have a marginal effect on the economic life of nations – neither women nor homosexuals are seen as primary, wealth-producing agents – and because these groups can be seen as destabilising agents. A Conservative MP has identified the women who are demanding smear tests as young, middle class scroungers and by implication educated, politically aware and liberated. Health issues are usually politically important in the sense that they concern the relative quality of facilities such as childcare, hospitals – in other words they are to do with resources and are economic. These three diseases are politically important however because they represent a direct conflict of interest between the government and groups they find threatening to the moral orthodoxy of the family and the attendant political philosophy invested therein.'

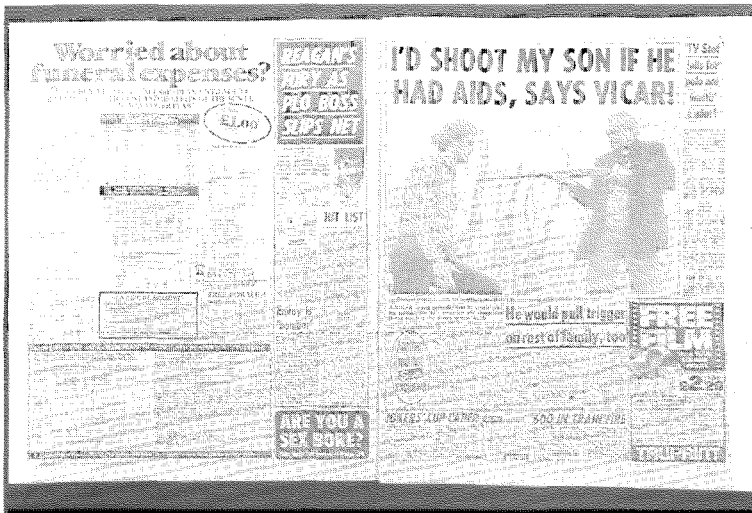
– 'Pathological Language', *Square Peg* no 10, 1985.

'Because "homosexuality" and "homophobia" are, in any of their avatars, historical constructions, because they are likely to concern themselves intensely with each other and to assume interlocking or mirroring shapes, because the theater of their struggle is likely to be intrapsychic or intra-institutional as well as public, it is not always easy (sometimes barely possible) to distinguish them from each other. Thus, for instance, Freud's study of Dr Schreber shows clearly that *the repression of homosexual desire* in a man who by any commonsense standard was heterosexual, occasioned paranoid psychosis; the psychoanalytic use that has been made of this perception, however, has been, not against *homophobia* and its schizogenic force, but against *homosexuality* – against homosexuals – on account of an association between "homosexuality" and mental illness.'

– Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Man: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, Columbia University Press, 1985.



In Touch For Men, March/April, 1985.



The Sun, October 14, 1985.

'RETURN OF THE REPRESSED: Process whereby what has been repressed – though never abolished by repression – tends to reappear, and succeeds in so doing in a distorted fashion in the form of a compromise. Freud always insisted on the "indestructibility" of the contents of the unconscious. Repressed material not only escapes destruction, it also has a permanent tendency to re-emerge into consciousness. It does so by more or less devious routes, and through the intermediary of secondary formations – "derivatives of the unconscious" – which are recognisable to a greater or lesser degree Freud is led to place the emphasis on the fact that the repressed, in order to return, makes use of the same chains of association which have served as the vehicle for repression in the first place In this context Freud evokes the excuse of the ascetic monk who, while seeking to banish temptation by gazing at an image of the crucifixion, is rewarded by the appearance of a naked woman in the place of the crucified Saviour: . . . "in and behind the repressing force, what is repressed proves itself victor in the end"'

– J Laplanche and J-B Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, Hogarth Press, 1973.

'On a warm summer's evening in 1726 a man was arrested on the open ground near the City called the Moorfields. That night two constables had gone out, in the immediate aftermath of the trials and executions of that year, to see if further arrests could be made . . . and they made their arrest, a man by the name of William Brown. That night was to end for him in imprisonment, the pillory, and probably, as a married man, the ruin of his life. In court he watched his words carefully, but when he was faced with arrest and the violent abuse of the constables he spoke with more feeling. It is hardly surprising. He had known Thomas Wright, who had recently been executed for sodomy, and he had lived – and survived – with so many others the tensions and fears of the previous twelve months. "I did it because I thought I knew him," he replied, "and I think there is no crime in making what use I please of my own body".'

– Alan Bray, *Homosexuality in Renaissance England*, Gay Men's Press, 1982.

For further information on AIDS and related issues, contact the Terence Higgins Trust in London, 01-278-8745 (daily 7-10pm) or Gay Switchboard 01-837-7324 (24 hour service).

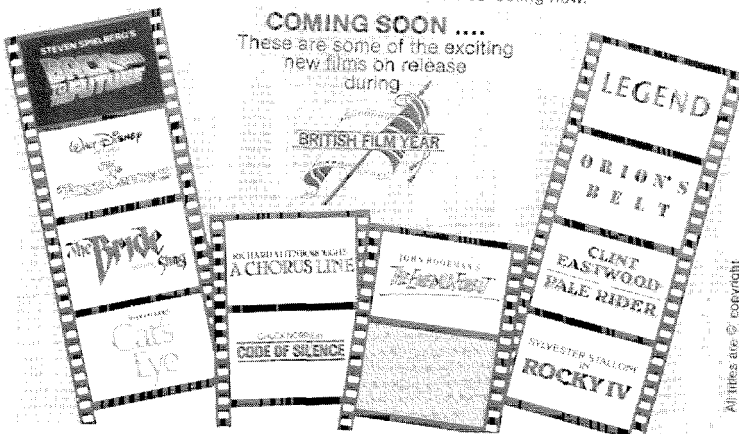
THE DISCOURSES OF BRITISH FILM YEAR

BY ANDREW HIGSON



McVitie's now offer you the magic of the big screen with just 6 tokens from these special packs. Collect the tokens and get a FREE CINEMA TICKET with one full priced

adult ticket purchased—see over for details. There are lots of films now showing at your cinema with more exciting releases to come—so start collecting now.



All titles are © copyright

Hollywood cinema under a flag of convenience? British Film Year advertising takes the biscuit.

IN THE INTRODUCTION to the January-February 1985 issue of *Screen*, a variety of cultural, political and economic factors were identified as establishing 'British cinema' as an important topic for public debate. Since the publication of that article, those conditions have, if anything, been consolidated: British Film Year (BFY) has been launched and, at the time of writing, has run about half its course; at the same time, the government plan to de-regulate the industry has been decisively pushed through, the film production renaissance has continued to be touted, and a spate of books and articles about British cinema has been published.¹ These four strands of activity are not at all unrelated, and, while this article is in part a review of several of such books, it is as much concerned with that complex of relationships. The first section will outline some of the structures and processes of British cinema, the film industry and film culture in the Year of British Film. In particular, I will examine some of the ideological implications of the BFY campaign. The second section will address more directly the various new literature about British cinema.

The relationship between this new literature and the BFY campaign is somewhat ambivalent: the literature—some of which is the official product of BFY—occupies in part the same ideological space as the campaign, in that it attempts to revive a popular interest in British cinema as a national cinema. BFY seeks to present itself as an institution of national dimensions, which has required that it reproduce a cinematic mythology—a national heritage, a tradition, a history. The recent popular histories are an important aspect of this reproduction of a mythology. At the same time, BFY is an aggressively commercial project, founded upon a particular idea of cinema, which it attempts to call into being—or, rather, revive, for it is a cinema of the past, a dying form. But here the literature tends to be more resistant to the discourses of the publicity machine. The difference is articulated in terms of a distinction between 'industry' and 'art'. Where BFY's campaign formulates cinema in terms of a nationalist and market-orientated industrialism, the film critical orthodoxy (the new literature included) tends towards an art cinema of personal expression. But the differences are far from absolute, and much is shared. In particular the independent sector of the audio-visual culture has little to gain from BFY either in terms of cultural legitimisation or in terms of economic security, and the literature similarly works to marginalise the more 'extreme' or oppositional elements of the independent sector, or to recuperate the sector as no more than a training ground for the dominant forms of cinema.²

In this respect, Steve Jenkins' article in the British Film Institute (BFI) publication *British Cinema Now* is important: an analysis of the reviewing practices of the dominant film critics in this country, it clearly shows the crucial function which 'popular' criticism plays for the film industry, a function which has become so successfully naturalised that its terms of debate seem the only sensible ways of discussing films. In particular, Jenkins argues convincingly that there is a close relationship between the liberal-humanist discourse of the newspaper critics and the

¹ The works referred to here are: Martin Auty and Nick Roddick (eds), *British Cinema Now*, London, British Film Institute, 1985. John Walker, *The Once and Future Film*, London Methuen 1985. Fenella Greenfield (ed), *A Night at the Pictures*, London, Columbus Books in association with British Film Year, 1985. Jane Fluegel (ed), *Michael Balcon: The Pursuit of British Cinema*, New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 1984. James Park, *Learning to Dream: the New British Cinema*, London, Faber and Faber, 1984. *The Sunday Times Magazine*, May 12, 1985 ('The British Film Issue') Stephen Wood (ed). Alexander Walker, *National Heroes: British Cinema in the Seventies and Eighties*, London, Harrap, 1985.

² For the purposes of this article, independent cinema is envisaged as those practices in the field of cinema which seek to challenge in various ways, interventionist, alternative and oppositional, the politics, aesthetics and economics of dominant forms of cinema. Within the trade, and in popular critical discussion of cinema, the term 'independent' is often used to describe relatively small production, distribution or exhibition ventures operating within the commercial sphere but not directly tied to the interests of, or controlled by, the major monopolistic concerns. When referring to this sector of operations, the term 'independent' is placed in inverted commas.

³ Steve Jenkins, 'A Critical Impasse', in Auty and Roddick, op cit, pp 123-138. See also Colin McArthur, 'British Film Reviewing: a Complaint', in *Screen*, January-February 1985, vol 26 no 1, pp 79-84.

⁴ The *Guardian*, August 31, 1985 p 9. Also BFY Broadsheet, October 1985, p 1.

⁵ *Screen International*, no 505, July 13, 1985, p 6.

⁶ See, for example, *AIP and Co*, no 65, April 1985.

forms of cinema celebrated as the 'renaissance' (one of the conditions of existence of British Film Year).³

The appearance of books like *British Cinema Now*, John Walker's *The Once and Future Film*, and the official BFY publication *A Night at the Pictures*, as well as a *Sunday Times Magazine* devoted entirely to the British Film Industry, and the very existence of BFY itself, all suggest a certain optimism about British cinema. Indeed, mid-year figures for cinema admissions for 1985 suggest a 35% increase over the year⁴ although how aggregate figures for the whole year will look is a slightly different question. One might also ask how much the American blockbuster *Rambo* has contributed to this increase, and whether this increase will be enough to make a significant impact on the drastic decline of recent years. The period is also, of course, marked by trade pessimism at the withdrawal of government protection of the film industry. In this context, should BFY be seen as simply a last ditch attempt to do something about the state of the film industry—and particularly the exhibition side of the industry—or is there a more complex set of conditions which can account for its existence?

I

There are two main strands to the activities of BFY:

1) the first is a general campaign to revive cinema-going in Britain. (Note the pervasiveness of the idea of revival.) The goal is to increase audiences by 4%, or 2 million admissions over the year.

2) the second strand is 'to highlight one of Britain's great national assets: our un-matched wealth of film-making talents, skills and facilities' (BFY Broadsheet, November 1984). In part, this involves a national and international celebration of both the current revival of production, and the heritage of a national cinema tradition. This celebration is being conducted through various forms of publicity, through festivals and film weeks at home and abroad, through the BFY roadshow and an education programme—and through the various books and articles recently published about British cinema.

On the face of it, BFY is no more than a publicity campaign, whose goal is to bring cinema and film back into the public consciousness. Thus a letter from its organisers in a trade paper in July 1985 claimed as their major success 'greater media and public awareness of films and local cinema'⁵. As such, this already points to a tension within the BFY campaign itself: while much of the initial enthusiasm and incentive for organising a Year of British Film came from the independent commercial producers lobby, specifically the Association of Independent Producers (AIP)⁶, it is the major exhibition circuits whose voices come through most clearly in BFY publicity. There is, then, a tension between the interests of the smaller production outfits and the circuit monopolies. This movement from production to exhibition can be seen in the statement with which Sir Richard Attenborough announced the BFY campaign at the Cannes Festival in 1984:

*The success of British film recently has presented us with an opportunity to stop the declining trend of cinema audiences and world wide distribution of British films. Unless some major initiative is taken, that will pass us by....*⁷

BFY publicity attempts to mask this tension, and to present itself as an all-inclusive campaign capable of embracing all forms of cinema and the film culture. Thus, the visits of the BFY Roadshow to a number of cities have included presentations by local independent film workshops, and the major publicity broadsheet included sympathetic statements from several independent exhibitors⁸. But a look down the list of films which were chosen to feature in the international programme of Film Weeks shows an overwhelming preference for commercial production with not a single independent film to be seen (unless one counts the British Film Institute/Channel 4 production, *The Draughtsman's Contract*). In the final analysis, it is evident that the BFY vision of cinema is dominated by economic interests, and cloaked in the glamour and excitement of show-biz.

One aspect of the BFY campaign which seems to resist this commercial domination is the education programme. This has involved fairly extensive collaboration with schoolteachers and other educators, and the production of various teaching packs on specific British films currently in distribution, and other film-related issues. While I do not intend to examine this area of BFY's campaign in any detail, it is worth noting the way in which this work is promoted in BFY publicity. The emphasis is on young people as future consumers:

*To help maintain and build the cinema's future audience, BFY's education programme is encouraging teachers to use film as they use the printed word BFY Education is designed to promote an appreciation for film and cinema amongst future potential audiences, long after the year itself is over.*⁹

The emphasis on consumption here defuses the *political* challenge of media studies and film studies as it has developed in this country, and fails to engage with the production of *critical* spectators, as opposed to 'appreciators of film', whatever else the education programme itself may be doing. In order to focus on ideological implications such as these, it is worth quoting from a July 1985 BFY broadsheet in full:

Cinema – the best place to see a film.

BFY is celebrating film in its first and natural home – the cinema. Here, and only here, with the dimming of the house lights, comes that electric concentration – the tears, laughter, and shared excitement which only the big screen can command, and an audience create. The audience is vital to that sense of occasion, and the three main cinema chains are spending £1 million a month during 1985 to entice film lovers away from their homes and back to the magic of the silver screen.

Throughout this year of film in Britain, the campaign is also highlighting the extraordinary contribution made by the army of British film-makers to

⁷ BFY Press Release, September 1984. Most of the BFY press and publicity material referred to here is available on file at the British Film Institute Library.

⁸ See BFY Broadsheets, November, 1984, and October, 1985.

⁹ BFY Press release, July 1985.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ An article about BFY in *Film and TV Technician*, April 1985, was accompanied by a cartoon showing a lavishly uniformed doorman at a cinema turning people away with the words 'Sorry, 1/6s full up!' The BFY October 1985 Broadsheet opens with an article entitled 'Year of 100 Stars' and discusses BFY producing 'a revival of something akin to the old star system' (p 1). BFY's predecessors can be traced back to 1924, when the British National Film League organised a series of 'British Film Weeks' to revive a dying film industry. See Margaret Dickinson and Sarah Street, *Cinema and State: the Film Industry and the British Government*, London, British Film Institute, 1985, p 14.

¹² See Graham Murdock and Peter Golding, 'Beyond Monopoly: Mass Communications in an Age of Conglomerates', in Peter Beharrell and Greg Philo (eds), *Trade Unions and The Media*, London, Macmillan, 1977, pp 93-117.

¹³ Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, 'But Do We Need It?', in Aury and Roddick, *op cit*, pp 147-158.

world cinema – and to a film industry which in 1984 earned this country over £200 million.

*Film artistry translated into moving pictures on a large screen weaves a unique spell. BFY is dedicated to continuing that spell – by keeping the cinema alive at the heart of the community.*¹⁰

This seductively nostalgic celebration of the 'magic of the silver screen' cannot acknowledge the current relations of production and consumption of leisure and entertainments, or envisage what cinema might be, as opposed to what it has been. Instead, its vision of mass audiences (and mass profits) and of cinema-going as a dominant form of popular culture 'alive at the heart of the community' looks back to a model of cinema from the 1930s and 1940s when cinema-going was indeed a routine social habit.¹¹ Specifically, it looks back to that period of the 1940s when Britain did seem momentarily to have a national-popular cinema. The chain of association set up in the BFY publicity have a profoundly nationalising (and naturalising) ideological function:

film industry – cinema – film lovers – audience – community – Britain.

It is a chain held together by a 'magical' process ('the magic of the silver screen') and: 'BFY is dedicated to continuing that spell'.

It is difficult, but important, to unpick the apparently seamless fabric of BFY's rhetoric: to assert, for instance, that cinema is not the *natural* home for film, but one that emerged under specific historical conditions. And it should be noted that, by focusing on the 'British film industry' in isolation from other aspects of popular culture or of the leisure/entertainments/information/communications industries, BFY displaces attention from the real relations of production of those industries: the 'film industry' is dominated now by multi-national conglomerates, for whom cinema interests are of only minor concern.¹² That is to say that the power base of the majors – the big American distributors plus Rank and Thorn-EMI – is no longer in a vertically integrated control of the different sectors of the film industry, but in international interests across the whole range of the leisure/entertainments/information/communications industries. As Geoffrey Nowell-Smith argues, in an important article in *British Cinema Now*¹³, it is difficult to speak today of a *British film industry*: it is neither specifically or distinctively British, nor specifically or distinctively a film industry. Even small-scale commercial enterprises now rely on interdependence with other forms of diffusion of audio-visual commodities than the cinema.

One of the claims made for the success of BFY is that it has brought together interests from right across the spectrum of the 'British film industry' (although not always harmoniously). But in attempting to achieve this new hegemony of cinema (whose other side is the marginalisation of all oppositional and alternative forms of cinema) a misrecognition of the structures of the audio-visual economy occurs, in which the film industry is still thought through in terms of the practices and assumptions of the cinema of the 1940s. The conflict of interests between the monopoly capital of the multinational conglomerates (Rank and

Thorn-EMI) and the non-monopolistic competitive capital of the smaller 'independent' production, distribution and exhibition companies (eg HandMade, Palace, Mainline) has been erased, or at least overlooked, in the attempt to reproduce/revive the idea of a national cinema. Similarly, BFY's attempts to win audiences back to the cinema are in a sense a refusal to recognise that the mode of consumption of film as a commodity has been radically transformed by contemporary capitalism's increasing emphasis from the 1950s onwards on home-based and family-based forms of technology, entertainment and consumption.¹⁴ This privatisation of leisure and popular culture is exploited in terms of opening up new markets for the commodity 'film' – through broadcast television, video, cable, satellite, etc – to the extent that, as the literature keeps reminding us, more people now watch more films than ever before, but they don't watch them at the cinema. Several contributors to *British Cinema Now* argue, on the basis of the emergence of these new markets, that it is only by recognising the symbiotic interdependence of film, TV and video etc that the renaissance in British film-making can continue to reproduce itself and the production and distribution of films continue to be profit-making concerns.¹⁵ But while many producers and distributors have recognised the importance of TV and video etc to their livelihood, and have therefore to some extent recuperated cinema's traditional enemy, they are glaringly repressed from official BFY publicity. Indeed BFY seems to be founded upon a refusal of the new markets in an attempt to revive cinema-going, as opposed to film viewing, as a popular cultural activity.

Simon Blanchard wrote in 1983:

*What seems unlikely to survive in these circumstances is any claim that cinemas still have to be considered as a significant cultural force enjoying broad popular support.*¹⁶

Two years on, BFY is entertaining precisely that consideration, a consideration which, as Blanchard puts it, 'amounts to (little) more than devising a life support system for "actually existing cinemas"'.¹⁷

At one level, this confusion over the cinema/TV relationship is an internal contradiction of capitalism, produced in the conflict between different forms of capital, and a suggestion that the film industry and the film culture has too much invested in the spectacular forms of cinema exhibition (in terms of both professional ideologies and practices and straightforward financial investment). At another level, this apparent repression of TV and video from the BFY campaign is the necessary correlative of BFY's return to the cinema of the 1940s, which is itself produced in the attempt to legitimate a particular image of the nation. BFY seeks to return to some mythical moment when Cinema and Nation were both certain and stable – mythical, because of course the 1940s cannot be read so simply in those terms – but productive for BFY, and for Thatcherism, all the same.¹⁸

¹⁴ See John Clarke and Tony Jefferson, 'Working Class Youth Cultures', in Geoff Mungham and G Pearson (eds), *Working Class Youth Culture*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976.

¹⁵ See especially Archie Tait, 'Distributing the Product' in Auty and Roddick, op cit, pp 71-82.

¹⁶ Simon Blanchard, 'Cinema-Going, Going, Gone?', in *Screen*, July-October, 1983, vol 24 nos 4-5, p 109.

¹⁷ *ibid*, p 111.

¹⁸ On British cinema in the 1940s, see Geoff Hurd (ed), *National Fictions: World War II in British Films and Television*, London, British Film Institute, 1984; John Ellis, 'Art, Culture and Quality: Terms for a Cinema in the '40s and '70s', *Screen* August 1978, vol 19 no 3, pp 9-50; and Charles Barr, *Ealing Studios*, London, Cameron and Tayleur/David and Charles, 1977.

¹⁹ Michael Balcon et al, *Twenty Years of British Film*, Falcon Press, 1947, p 11.

²⁰ *Recommendations to the Government on the Future of British Film Production*, Association of Independent Producers, London, 1983, quoted in Blanchard, op cit, p 111.

²¹ John Howkins, 'British Film Year', *Sight and Sound*, vol 54 no 1, Winter 1984-5. BFY's original proposals for an extensive international programme with a touring pavilion had to be abandoned in early 1985 due to the failure to attract sufficient funding from either the government or non-film companies. A few international events have been retained, including British film weeks organised by the British Council. See *Screen International*, no 493, April 20, 1985, p 16.

²² The BFY's decision not to take the Roadshow to Northern Ireland raises even more poignantly the question 'whose image of which nation?', while the reporting of the international programme in the BFY broadsheet of October 1983, under the title 'The Empire Strikes Back' connotes both American cinema, and British imperialism.

²³ Sheila Johnston, 'Charioteers and Ploughmen', in Aury and Roddick, op cit, pp 99-110.

This is the work of the second strand of the BFY campaign, promoting and celebrating the idea of a national cinema which can project Britain to itself and to the world. Significantly, the international part of the campaign is being promoted under the slogan 'A Nation's Image'. In 1947, Michael Balcon (then in charge of Ealing Studios) felt able to write:

*We have at last learned to make a film which is 'national' in the best sense of that now dangerous word; we have at last gained the interest and respect of government circles who have shown their willingness to help us win our battle At a time when our country's prestige throughout the world is our foremost consideration, we must remember that the good British film truthfully reflecting the British way of life, is the most powerful ambassador we have.*¹⁹

In the 1980s the populist politics of David Puttnam, the Association of Independent Producers, and of at least certain tendencies within BFY are again about the production of a responsible, artistically respectable but always popular cinema – a cinema which appeals to 'the public', but which is also a *national* cinema. Compare Balcon's words above to an AIP statement of 1983:

*Film is uniquely able to project the British way of life and reflect British values and culture abroad. Such exposure, by helping to maintain awareness and appreciation of Britain among her trading partners and political allies vitally enhances the nation's global image. . . .*²⁰

The centrality of this conviction to the BFY campaign is underlined in a report on BFY's ill-fated overseas British Film Weeks:

*The purpose of these events is to use British films as the main attraction to promote a wide range of British products . . . [These] events are being substantially funded by non-film companies. . . .*²¹

Cinema in the '40s played an important role in establishing a new hegemony, a new popular political consensus, around World War II as the People's War, around the building of the Welfare State, and around the postwar Labour government. Cinema in the '80s is again caught up in a process of negotiating a new sense of national identity, in fixing a new and stable national self-image, which coincides with Thatcherism's appeal to 'the people' in the rhetoric of 'One Nation'.²² Witness, for instance, alongside the attempt to establish the tradition of cinema as part of the national heritage, the number of recent British films which deal with 'our national past', and in particular the 'glories' of the colonial and aristocratic past: *Chariots of Fire*, *Gandhi*, *Another Country*, *A Passage to India*. This represents a complex working over of a popular anxiety about national identity in the present (the product of *Dallas* on TV and *Rambo* at the cinema, economic depression and political crisis).

Sheila Johnston's chapter in *British Cinema Now*²³ conducts a fairly detailed analysis of two recent films – *Chariots of Fire* and *The Ploughman's Lunch* – in terms of their concern with precisely this issue of



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Nostalgia for a national heritage: stamps issued for British Film Year.

national unity and national identity at a time of crisis. Her argument is that these films, in attempting to articulate a sense of nationhood for the '80s, must negotiate a complex series of thematic and generic conflicts, a process which is complicated further by the publicity campaign which promoted *Chariots*. The cinema trailer for this film was premised upon nostalgia for great British cinema of the past, situating *Chariots* as the present-day product of that national heritage ('It's easy to forget how wonderful British films used to be'²⁴). Of course, as Johnston argues, such a knowing, rhetorical articulation of Britishness has been central to the construction of the production renaissance:

The early emergence of such self-consciously British films and the promise of more to come were key factors in inverting (the) popular perception of bankruptcy (in the late '70s) so rapidly and so radically and in re-establishing the British cinema as a 'culturally defined entity'.²⁵

But while the production of such cinematic representations is relatively autonomous of any direct government intervention, it is also important to acknowledge that the BFY campaign *does* have official government support: in particular, BFY receives financial backing (£¼million) – a discreet acknowledgement of the ideological importance of marketing a national image and a particular conception of the national culture as a commodity. As Sylvia Harvey has pointed out in a different context,

as an efficient system for producing profit in this country, this cinema is dead, but as an ideal of cultural expression it has remained astoundingly and embarrassingly alive. It is a ghost that will not go away.²⁶

At first glance, it seems ironic that financial backing and other forms of support should be forthcoming at a time when the government is effec-

²⁴ The quotation is from the *Chariots* trailer. For a discussion of the trailer, see *ibid*, p 102-3.

²⁵ *ibid*, p 109.

²⁶ Sylvia Harvey, 'Independent Cinema and Cultural Democracy', in Rod Stoneman and Hilary Thompson (eds), *The New Social Function of Cinema*, Catalogue, British Film Institute Productions, 1979/80, London, British Film Institute, p 93.

²⁷ Quoted in the BFY broadsheet, November 1984.

²⁸ Patrick Wright, 'A Blue Plaque for the Labour Movement? Some Political Meanings of the "National Past"', in *Formations of Nation and People*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984, p 55.

tively removing the most direct forms of State intervention in and protection of the film economy. But, in fact, the money for BFY represents no more than tacit support for the other side of the *laissez-faire* economics of de-regulation—self-reliance and self-regulation in the 'healthy competition' of an 'open' market. Thus witness Norman Lamont, then Minister with responsibility for film, as quoted by BFY in its publicity:

BFY aims to make people aware of the quality of the film industry. But it's also a commitment by the film industry itself to its own future, to its own ability to seek out markets and audiences and to use the creativity and originality that we have in such abundance in this country. And it's because the industry has shown such faith in its future that the government has been pleased to express its confidence by supporting this venture financially.²⁷

The optimism with which the government greets BFY's economic initiative can only be made sense of in terms of the government's vision of the new market economy within which the film as commodity circulates, given the emergence and consolidation of TV, video, cable, satellite, etc. But these new markets are, as already noted, repressed from the BFY's description of the present scenario. From the government's point of view, the cinema/film industry is something from the past, of ideological significance only, as a means of securing a stable national identity. The contradictory relationship of Thatcherism to ideas of the 'national past' has been discussed elsewhere by Patrick Wright:

In the conservative government of triumphant monetarism, ... the past is not just a heritage or trust in need of reluctant, because costly, protection. Neither is it just a convenient camouflage for preserving relations of domination under the guise of national identity and interest. It is also the oblivion which stands there as the rightful abode of all those forces which resist the rationalisation of social relations around market forces.²⁸

The cinema as a facet of the national past, as constructed in the discourses of BFY, is caught up in this same confused and contradictory relationship with the Thatcherist State: through the BFY campaign, and through the literature which supports and extends it, the past of British cinema is celebrated as part of the national heritage, which gains minimal—and reluctant—government protection through financial support to BFY. At the same time this debate over the idea of a national cinema, and the sense of a renaissance, coupled with the return to the past in several recent British films, displaces concern away from current 'relations of domination': nostalgia papers over the crises of past and present, as international cinematic success becomes a symbol of national pride ('the British are coming ...'). But finally there is the oblivion of cinema's nineteenth century photo-chemical mechanics standing against the new age of the electronic media. Film as such belongs in the past; it is an antiquated and out-moded form. And it is precisely this obsolescence, coupled with recognition of the internationalisation of the leisure indus-

tries in general, that reinforces the government's reluctance to protect the film industry.

Finally, there is the added contradiction of contemporary British cinema's turn to the United States. If BFY is to achieve its goal of increasing cinema admissions, it will in part be reliant on a stream of Hollywood blockbusters²⁹ (and it should be noted that the logic of the blockbuster is premised on the notion of cinema-going as a special and rare event, rather than a routine social habit³⁰). Similarly, the success of several recent British films has in part been defined in terms of the US Oscar celebrations, and clearly a film like Puttnam and Joffe's *The Killing Fields* is unashamedly aimed at the American market. The relationship of the Academy Awards to marketing is underlined by the President of BFY, Sir Richard Attenborough:

*Oscars are not inherently, of course, a sign of revival in British Cinema. But, in tandem with their presentation, the winning films received major distribution in the United States, gaining box office returns which placed them in the league table of the highest-grossing movies ever made.*³¹

It is salutary to look back again at the debate about national cinema in the 1940s, and Laurence Kardish's comments on Michael Balcon's policies and practices at Ealing Studios are worth quoting in this context:

*[Balcon] bore the idea of a national cinema as an escutcheon to attract attention to his films, to get them exhibited, and to have his investment returned. The call for a national cinema was a tool of the market, a reasonable, spontaneous and efficacious weapon against restrictive business practices, including the tendency to play it safe by showing American films.*³²

While much of the film renaissance may be aimed at the US market, it is also the case that the 'independent' commercial producer's lobby see the BFY campaign as in part a way of winning stronger state protection of their interests from American distribution in this country. The case for protectionism in the film industry has always been a difficult argument, calling for economic and cultural sophistication. Historically, while the cultural argument may have had some impact on the ways in which politicians and other public figures thought about the film industry, government policy has almost invariably opted for a strongly economic policy. There have been good reasons for this, as shown by *Cinema and State*, Dickinson and Street's major study of the relationships between the film industry and the government. In their discussion of the mid-1920s debate about protection of the film industry, which culminated in the 1927 Quota Act, they observe that

*cultural arguments were . . . invoked to justify the quota, and a few remarks about the cultural importance of film became an almost obligatory element in any preamble to a statement on film policy.*³³

²⁹ It's no surprise, then, to find that *Rambo* promotional gimmicks are a major attraction at BFY Roadshow events!

³⁰ 'In Britain, cinema-going as a regular activity has passed from the public consciousness, never to return. Today, in order to make a movie work, it must become an event, more than simply a film' - Paul Webster, of Palace Pictures, quoted in 'Wanted, Exhibitors Who Care', *Hollywood Reporter*, September 28, 1984, pp S20-S23.

³¹ 'Introduction', in *British Films 1985: the Guide to British Film Production*, British Film and TV Producers Association, 1985.

³² Laurence Kardish, 'Michael Balcon and the Idea of a National Cinema', in Jane Fliegel (ed), *op cit*, p 43.

³³ Dickinson and Street, *op cit*, p 2.

It is clear from their discussion of the period that one of the economic justifications for the introduction of a quota system was that it would create the climate in which one or more strong, well-financed and vertically integrated British combines might be developed which could compete on an equal footing in the market with the large US combines. This established a strong relationship between the interests of the Board of Trade, the City, and monopoly capital in the film industry, a relationship which has constituted a structural block to the lobby for a more culturalist form of protection. Similarly, Dickinson and Street's discussion of the debate about the film industry in the late '30s and the '40s draws attention to the close relationship established between US trade, the British Treasury and the Board of Trade, which produced legislation that sought to both appease the British film industry and encourage the introduction of dollars.

In the context of this tension between arguments for the development of an indigenous, independent film industry in Britain, and arguments that the policies of British industry must conform to the interests of US capital, there is a noticeable shift away from a government policy based on defensive protection of the film industry to a policy based on financial inducements. As is well known, this latter policy, through such measures as the now defunct Eady Levy, encouraged the investment of US capital in British films, plant and personnel, but this has hardly helped the development of a specifically British film culture. Indeed, the culturalist arguments for the protection of the film industry seemed doomed to failure in the face of this complex interlocking of interests between state and capital. As Dickinson and Street point out,

Finance and profit have always been the main factors in deciding what films are made and shown in Britain. The system of State aid was not designed to replace or compete with commercial finance, and it failed to reverse the long-standing trends towards monopoly and American control.³⁴

And yet the argument continues in almost the same form as sixty years ago – as can be seen in the response of the Association of Cinematograph, Television and Allied Technicians (ACTT) to the government's 1984 White Paper on 'Film Policy'. The ACTT argues that, while some of the policies outlined in the White Paper may be applicable to the US dominated multi-national market, they are quite inappropriate to the needs of the smaller budget 'indigenous' British productions or those of the Workshop Sector, which are intended primarily for British consumption.

³⁴ *ibid*, p 248. See also Vincent Porter, *On Cinema*, London, Pluto Press, 1985, pp 82, 90.

³⁵ ACTT's response to the Government White Paper 'Film Policy', Association of Cinematograph Television and Allied Technicians, 1984, p 5.

It is precisely these sectors which allow British film makers to make films for and about our own society, which would benefit immensely from constructive government intervention.³⁵

The call for government intervention, and particularly the provision of new sources of revenue, is thus formulated in a weak mix of economic and cultural arguments:

*It is our opinion that the capital base thus provided would be sufficiently strong to allow a positive take-off of a totally regenerated British film industry, to the benefit not only of the workers within that industry, but to the public in terms of better viewing, to the government, in terms of increased revenue and British status abroad, and consequently to the country as a whole.*³⁶

³⁶ *ibid*, p 18.

³⁷ John Ellis, 'The Institution of Cinema' in *Edinburgh '77 Magazine*, no 2.

The lack of success in the past of such policies was in large part due to the coalescing of political and economic interests in a formation which does not show any signs of substantial change. It is difficult therefore to see how a policy such as the ACTT's can have any success in the present, founded as it is upon an appeal to those same interests, in primarily the same terms. The culturalist argument has never really been acceded to; it has been used only weakly to justify certain economic policies which have tended not to create the structures within which small independent companies can flourish in the long term. Thus, for instance, the now defunct National Film Finance Corporation (NFFC) did not have the capital to support more than one-off ventures, and now even that opening has been lost to private capital. Similarly, the development of the multi-national conglomerates, and the increasing centralisation of government economic and political control can only exacerbate the problems facing such a policy proposal.

Even so, it is clear that in the last two to three decades, while there has been an increasingly centralised control of the mass media economy, there has been both the space and the 'need' for non-monopolistic competitive capital and interests, which are able to perform functions of some importance to monopoly capital. In particular, the independent commercial production companies—and the NFFC—have operated in the areas of most risk to profitability: film production in general, and more innovative mainstream work in particular. The majors in Britain have increasingly withdrawn from regular production activity. They have also significantly rationalised their exhibition interests (but it remains to be seen how the development of multiplex cinemas at Milton Keynes and elsewhere, and the move by Cannon, one of the major distributors, into art cinema distribution, will effect the present situation). This is no simple 'decline of cinema'—although clearly cinema has been displaced from its central position within the formation of British popular culture by the various forms of televisual entertainment. It makes more sense, as John Ellis has suggested, to understand this situation in terms of a transformation of the space of cinema.³⁷ The multi-national conglomerates' consolidation of their hold over the market has been achieved only by concentrating on the most profitable areas (particularly distribution), or by diversifying their interests, and therefore progressively de-colonising the areas of most risk. A space is thus created on the edges of the institution of cinema for the construction of new cinematic forms and practices. It is thus not coincidental that in the same period (from the late '50s onwards) of the rapid intensification of monopoly control of the media industries, a variety of new practices

³⁸ See e.g. Graham Murdock and Peter Golding, 'Capitalism, Communication and Class Relations', in James Curran et al (eds), *Mass Communication and Society*, London, Edward Arnold/Open University Press, 1977.

have emerged within the space of cinema. I am thinking of the growth of the art-house and repertory sector, and the re-emergence and development of the avant-garde/independent/workshop sector (and also the growth of the pornographic film industry). While from the point of view of political economy, there is an inevitable marginalisation of economic activity in this de-colonised space³⁸, their cultural impact, relatively autonomous of their economic position, seems far greater. Similarly, the space is opened up for the development of more democratic control of small-scale, local activities as they fall out of the sphere of influence of highly concentrated trans-national leisure monopolies.

II

The second part of this article will examine some of the new literature about British cinema in more detail. In particular, I will look at how that literature characterises the institution of cinema in Britain, and the sorts of arguments that are mobilised in order to present cinema and the film industry as objects of concern. This will lead on to an analysis of the terms in which contemporary film production is discussed. Finally, I will look at the ways in which the challenge of independent cinema is negotiated in this literature.

Of the literature which deals with the contemporary scene, *British Cinema Now* is by far the most searching inquiry – and has been useful in formulating the arguments in this article. But it is a profoundly contradictory book (as the editors acknowledge in their introduction) so that, although some of the authors deal with independent cinema or develop a critique of the cultural assumptions of dominant cinema, the editorialising work of the book, and the publisher's presentation of it, tend to transform it into a text which too often seems implicitly to support the BFY vision of cinema. Several of the articles are no more than impressionistic surveys, and, although it is useful to have a range of such surveys collected together in one book, their eclecticism fails to establish cinema as a complex institution of cultural production. A number of the authors do deal with the changing industrial forms of the audio-visual media, and in particular the inter-dependence of cinema, television and video; but, contradicting this analysis of changing conditions, the emphasis elsewhere, and sometimes even in the same articles, seems to be on the possibility of a healthy re-vitalised industry based on a 1940s model of cinema.

Indeed, most of the recently published literature fails to put forward a coherent argument as to why the project of trying to (re-)establish a thriving and indigenous national cinema should be supported. Too often, a sort of minimal base-line is resorted to: 'there has been a cinema and a film industry in the past, therefore there should be one in the future'. At best, an argument is advanced that going to the cinema is a public, collective experience, but this is then collapsed into a notion of

cinema only as a public, collective form of entertainment and wish-fulfilment—where the emphasis, in fact, is on individual sensual experience, rather than on a collective debate about representation. Thus, in James Park's *Learning to Dream*, cinema-going is defended because only the cinema can reproduce the spectacular and intense day-dream conditions of film viewing—and the end-point of this line is the BFY's 'Cinema—the best place to see a film'. The social function of cinema is not examined, and it seems natural therefore to defend the dominant forms of cinema because they are apparently so pleasurable and so entertaining....

In general, the emphasis of *British Cinema Now* is on the industry, from which point of view cultural and political issues can only be marginally addressed. Robert Murphy's chapter, for instance, implies that 'new talent' in the film industry, plus new sources of investment (coupled with the possibility of diffusion of films through new markets) will naturally rejuvenate it and produce 'British films'. There is no question of whether it's worthwhile to save the industry as it exists, or of asking what sort of cinema might be most appropriate to the complex social formation of Britain in the mid-'80s. The only cultural factor which is considered here is the idea of creative workers within the film industry, and the key figures in Murphy's account are the producers.³⁹ The refusal to debate cultural issues comes across even more strongly in Matthew Silverstone's contribution to the book (a standpoint described by the editors as 'down-to-earth commercialism'⁴⁰):

Arguments which are presented in favour of the government playing a greater role in the financing of films generally ignore—wilfully or otherwise—the underlying cause of the lack of success of British films. Like any industry, if the product is what the consumer wants (or can be persuaded to want), the companies will not require government intervention. It is only when the product is not selling that a clamour of voices insists that the government should give more support to an industry. The film business is one such industry, in which there is a growing demand for intervention. But no industry can survive without profit, no matter how many government subsidies there are. And to create a profit, it must make 'majority audience' films. Government subsidies promote films that are geared to specific audiences and they do not benefit the state of the industry in the long run, whatever they may do for film culture. To be successful, films must be competitive internationally, and to be competitive internationally, films must have wide popular appeal.⁴¹

If Silverstone's 'analysis' constructs cinema as a business like any other, there are others who discuss it in terms of the mythology of show-business. This is the line adopted by the *Sunday Times Magazine's* special 'British Film Issue' in May 1985. The key terms here are 'the deal', 'the business' and 'the star': high finance and creativity are bound together in a fascinating circuit of money, glamour and dreams (often dashed, but that's part of the business). Walker's *The Once and Future Film* concludes on a similar note:

³⁹ Robert Murphy, 'Three companies: Boyd's Co., HandMade, and Goldcrest', in Auty and Roddick (eds), op cit, pp 43-56.

⁴⁰ 'Introduction', in Auty and Roddick (eds), op cit, p 2.

⁴¹ Matthew Silverstone, 'Finding the Money', in Auty and Roddick (eds), op cit, p 42.

⁴² John Walker, op cit, p 160.

⁴³ Frederic Raphael, 'Do I Hear Trumpets?', *Sunday Times Magazine*, May 12, 1985, p 12.

*British cinema seems healthier now than it has been for many years. An explosion of talent in the cinema has coincided with a voracious demand for films. (But) the British cinema still lacks showmen, who, by risk and daring, and flair, can re-vitalise an industry on their own.*⁴²

In 1985-6 BFY attempts to fill that lack with its own breed of 'showmanship', selling the cinema of spectacle. It is fitting also that Walker refers to the show-men: the *Sunday Times Magazine* makes it clear once again that while the men run the business, the function of women is, precisely, to be on show. The only women to appear in this industry-wide celebration of cinema are those to be looked at, and the servility of this definition of the film actress is underlined by a cover image of Jenny Agutter as a *concessionaire*. Note also Frederic Raphael's disillusionment with the so-called renaissance:

*Truffaut once said that movie-making was a matter of pointing the camera at pretty girls. It is a strange renaissance which produces no new female stars.*⁴³

In order to step outside this discourse about cinema, it is necessary to turn to Geoffrey Nowell-Smith's concluding chapter in *British Cinema Now*. This is really the only contribution to the recent literature on

Women's place in British cinema? Actress Jenny Agutter on the cover of the *Sunday Times Magazine*.



British cinema which seriously asks 'what sort of a culture is it that we live in in Britain in the 1980s, and what place or role can cinema or films have within that culture?', but his call for a national cultural policy along these lines is somewhat lost in the context of the book, which tends towards a market-orientated assessment of cinema.

Nowell-Smith's argument that the economic infrastructure of cinema in Britain is rapidly disappearing makes his questions about what it is that constitutes a British cinema – both economically and culturally – even more pertinent. His attention to the cultural effects of Hollywood's economic domination are also important, despite the familiarity of the concern:

*The hidden history of cinema in British culture, and in popular culture in particular, has been the history of American films popular with the British public.... The British cinema is in the invidious position of having to compete with an American cinema which, paradoxical as this may seem, is by now far more deeply rooted in British culture than is the native product.*⁴⁴

As such, the current British film renaissance leads a precarious existence:

*The main problem for the much touted British cinema revival is that the making of and going to British films is not a central part of film culture, let alone audio-visual culture in general.*⁴⁵

Most of the new literature about British cinema attempts to connect, as part of a continuing and evolving tradition, both the cinema of the past, and the present 'revival years' (as BFY have christened the 1980s in their publicity). Walker's book self-consciously echoes this project in its title *The Once and Future Film*. Although this deals largely with the British cinema in the '70s and '80s, it opens with a reference to Ealing Studios, and elsewhere looks briefly at certain aspects of British cinema from the '50s onwards. The title of the BFY's official publication, *A Night at the Pictures*, is also a nostalgic recollection of the heyday of mass popular cinema-going. A lavishly illustrated coffee table book, with a foreword by David Puttnam and an introduction by Sir Richard Attenborough in his capacity as the President of BFY, it is a predictable melange of potted histories, dates and names, with a chronology of the industry and an extensive 'Critic's choice' of 'the ten best British films'. It also contains two essays, one on the historical development of the British cinema – 'The British Tradition' by Gilbert Adair; and the other on the present situation – 'The British Revival' by Nick Roddick, who is also one of the co-editors of *British Cinema Now*.

Even *Michael Balcon: The Pursuit of British Cinema*, produced by the Museum of Modern Art, New York, to accompany a major retrospective of Balcon films, has a preface (again) by David Puttnam, which attempts to link Balcon's work to the current revival. Puttnam describes Balcon as 'the central and outstanding figure in the creation of what is usually

⁴⁴ Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, *op cit*, pp 151-2.

⁴⁵ *ibid*, p 155.

⁴⁶ David Puttnam, 'Preface', in Jane Fluegel (ed), *op cit*, p 7.

⁴⁷ *ibid*, p 8.

⁴⁸ David Puttnam, 'British Cinema, 1981-...', in *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1981, p 239.

⁴⁹ Adrienne Mancina, 'Introduction', in Jane Fluegel (ed), *op cit*, p 15.

termed the "British film industry"⁴⁶. He adds that 'during his final years, Mick became a beacon to those of us who dreamed of a re-generation of the British film . . . I like to think *Chariots (of Fire)* was a film of which Mick would thoroughly have approved.'⁴⁷ (Elsewhere, Puttnam has written '*Chariots of Fire* was for and to an extent about Michael Balcon.'⁴⁸)

In the main, these books tend to reproduce popular mythologies and the 'obviousness' of common sense, rather than to subject them to critical investigation: issues are treated superficially rather than in depth. This is in marked contrast to the scholarly research of Dickinson and Street's *Cinema and State* (despite its tendency to view the state in terms only of the Board of Trade and Government legislation).

To take the book on Balcon first, besides an admirably extensive bibliography and filmography, and (another) chronology of facts and figures, the two main essays by Laurence Kardish and Geoff Brown, in addition to covering very similar ground (Balcon's career), tend to go for easy assumptions rather than produce new insights. However, Kardish is relatively critical of the idea of a national cinema, especially as developed by Balcon; while Brown makes available some lesser known material about Balcon's pre-Ealing career; and the introduction by Adrienne Mancina partially challenges the mythology of national unity which surrounds Ealing cinema ('on close analysis, one sees that the theme of discontent is a sub-text of many Ealing films . . .'⁴⁹).

A Night at the Pictures also suffers from superficiality. Apart from a brief but very intelligent look at the work of Humphrey Jennings – a look which is genuinely critical in its attempts to focus on Jennings' work in terms of 'national cinema' – and a few hints about desire and repression in British cinema, there is little unexpected in Adair's chapter. Nick Roddick develops some of the material he had earlier produced for *British Cinema Now* in discussing the prevailing conditions facing the production sector, explaining the renaissance in terms of the role of the new young dynamic producers tapping new sources of finance (especially tax shelter money and Channel 4 funding), but, apart from questioning whether these conditions are sufficient to produce a national cinema, he tends towards slippery and superficial claims about the supposed 'Britishness' of British films.

Walker's book is, if anything, even less critical. It rather uneasily interweaves three (untheorised) themes or currents:

1) a sort of popular trade journalism about the film industry, with the patent and conservative assumption that because the cinema has existed, it should naturally continue to exist. No positive reasons for supporting cinema are put forward. Walker attempts to establish the conditions for a healthy film industry, claiming that this would create the space for the development of his other two concerns, a cinema of purpose and a cinema of passion, two positions which are not easily reconciled in the discourse of the book.

2) the second strand to his argument involves a conventional British film cultural reverence for the documentary-realist tradition, which is

inevitably associated with the idea of a national cinema in Britain. However, the book exhibits a certain confusion as to the place of this tradition in the cinema and film culture of today. This confusion is the product of an uneasy confrontation between the assumptions of a film cultural discourse developed in Britain in the '30s, and those of a new critical orthodoxy, an orthodoxy which appeals to Walker, and which constitutes the third strand to his book.

3) the third strand, which is typical of the new film critical orthodoxy which also runs through *A Night at the Pictures*, and *Learning to Dream*, for instance, is the celebration of a personal cinema; a cinema of auteurs, of visual style, imagination and passion. This is opposed to the documentary-realist tradition of a cinema of purpose. It is an opposition which is symptomatic of a transformation of dominant British film cultural conceptions of the 'specifically cinematic', and of the uses of cinema, a transformation which has taken place between the '40s and the present.⁵⁰ While there is an obvious tension between the idea of a cinema of *personal* expression and the idea of a *national* cinema, Walker manages to link the former to the latter by emphasising the surrealist touches in the work of film-makers such as Nic Roeg and Ken Russell, touches which, he argues, make the familiar strange, and which thus challenge our assumptions about the culture of the familiar within which our everyday lives are situated.

The new critical orthodoxy is pervasive. Its most visible effect is the almost complete re-evaluation and rehabilitation over the last few years of the work of Powell and Pressburger – work which is profoundly disturbing to the documentary-realist culture, but a landmark for the new orthodoxy. This is brought home in the 'Critic's Choice' at the back of *A Night at the Pictures*, where the films of Powell and Pressburger figure prominently.⁵¹ To some extent, this new orthodoxy is at odds with the dominant industrialist-nationalist discourses of BFY. It embodies a profoundly romantic conception of the cinema, shot through with notions of individual talent, creativity and personal expression. Indeed, it depends upon an ideological process which constructs an economy of 'creativity': 'creativity' is that which is constrained by the industrial structures of the cinema; 'creativity' is the excess of industry, that which it must regulate. Within the terms of this discourse, the film producers play a central role: they provide a vital link as facilitators of the 'personal film-makers' held outside the commercial structures. Hence the importance of the producer within contemporary British cinema and film culture – the Puttnams of the world who can both spot and nurture creative talent and attract finance.

This discourse highly values the idea of independence – but it is an independence that is defined in terms of 'art' versus 'industry', rather than in terms which might radically challenge the dominant consumerist conception of the social function of cinema. In this way 'independence' becomes synonymous with 'quality'.

A wide spectrum of films can be celebrated by this discourse, ranging from what we might call the culture of advertising (a surfeit of decoration, an empty, spectacular and calculated seductiveness, cinema as

⁵⁰ See Andrew Higson and Steve Neale, 'Introduction: Components of the National Film Culture', *Screen* January-February 1985, vol 26 no 1, pp 3-8; and John Ellis, 'Art, Culture and Quality...', *op cit*.

⁵¹ For a discussion of the place of Powell and Pressburger in British film culture, see Ian Christie (ed), *Powell, Pressburger and Others*, London, British Film Institute, 1978.

⁵² See John Walker, *op cit*, p 21-2.

⁵³ Derek Jarman, *New Musical Express*, May 1985. Jarman's relationship to the new critical orthodoxy is complex: his films are valorised in the terms of this discourse; but he is highly critical of one of the key texts of this orthodoxy, James Park's *Learning to Dream* (see Derek Jarman, 'To whom it may concern', xeroxed broadsheet, 1985) which he sees as dealing in 'the cinema of product'.

⁵⁴ It may well be that the ACTT Workshop Declaration and Channel 4 funding have helped to produce a situation where some workshop activity is no more than another production context within the film industry. But this would certainly not be true of the independent sector as a whole. See Richard Woolley, 'The Facility to Unite', *Screen* November-December 1984, vol 25 no 6, pp 17-22.

marketing) to the arch romanticism of Derek Jarman. Certainly, as a way of thinking about cinema, it is a discourse shared by film-makers and critics alike. The auteurism of the discourse tends to mean that films once produced are sold on the uniqueness of each product: the identification of a generic narrative image as a means of marketing would imply a form of *non-independence*. In part, this then creates problems for the development of an industry of the sort envisaged by BFY. The industry in the past has relied upon the idea of genre (and now of course the sequel); but a number of the films which constitute the renaissance are constructed as one-offs, unrepeatable – and thus perhaps incapable of building up a popular habit of cinema-going, a popular expectation of cinema. Similarly, they do not necessarily allow for continuity of production within the industry (although this may be as much a cause as an effect). Certainly, as Mamoun Hassan has pointed out, such films require a different sort of distribution and promotion to the patterns of wave release normally employed by the major distributors.⁵²

While BFY inevitably attempts to win the assent of this essentially romantic discourse – emanating from both critics and film-makers – it is a discourse which is necessarily resistant to complete incorporation by the campaign's industrialist-nationalist interests because of its structuring around an art/industry opposition. Indeed, it is a discourse which has been mobilised by some as a weapon *against* BFY's economic, market-orientated approach to cinema. This is the argument of Derek Jarman, for instance, who talks of BFY as being concerned only with what he calls 'the cinema of product', a resistance to BFY which at one level is clearly to be applauded. As Jarman puts it, 'the cinema of product precludes individual voices.'⁵³ But, as a way of conceptualising cinema, this position must still be questioned for its reliance on traditional bourgeois concepts of the artist, the individual subject, creative freedom and patronage. It is a weak position from which to campaign for a better organised, better funded independent cinema, which calls for the construction of *trans-individual* institutions. Thus, while it is at odds with much of what BFY stands for, it is also at odds with the workshop sector of independent cinema, a differently politicised conception of cinema. As a discourse, it is much more easily mobilised in debates about the possibility of a British *art* cinema.

The sympathy shown towards some of the concerns of the independent film and video movement is one of the more problematic aspects of this new critical orthodoxy. The populist address of the discourse is able both to acknowledge the existence of the independent movement, and then to attempt to tailor its range of often oppositional concerns to the concerns of the British art cinema project – and, in particular, the concerns of the BFI Production Board over the last two or three years. In so doing, the difference of this movement – the grounds of its independence – are disavowed in a dual process of incorporation. Economically, the independent sector is represented as just another production context within the film industry⁵⁴; and culturally, or ideologically, it is represented 'as a sort of training ground for individuals who will (if they are

talented enough) go on to make 'art house films' within the mainstream commercial film-making sector. This conveniently ignores the fact that the independent sector has been developed in contradistinction to the European model of prestigious auteurist cinema produced for the international film and television market. Of course, it may well be true that if independent cinema is defined only in terms of a rigorously oppositional practice, it can only occupy a marginal, and politically and culturally ineffectual position, and that therefore it must also seek to intervene in the practices of the dominant cinema. But it is important to maintain a distinction between processes of 'incorporation' and 'intervention', while recognising that, at the same time, they are separated by only a very fine line, given the nature of the various funding bodies for independent cinema, and their relationship to the state. But this only makes it more important to insist on forms of intervention which are more than mere stylistic influence on the mainstream, and to question policies such as those espoused by the Production Board in recent years.

Significantly, the closest that Walker's *The Once and Future Film* comes to independent cinema is a brief mention of London repertory cinemas, the Production Board and *The Draughtsman's Contract*. Nick Roddick discusses independent cinema in both *A Night at the Pictures* and *British Cinema Now*. In the former book, independent cinema is justified as meriting 'a moment's attention'⁵⁵, a brief encounter which ends with the apt observation that 'it is important to realise that, although it will almost certainly not be celebrated, it is as much a part of BFY as the *Gandhis* and the *Passage to India*'.⁵⁶ On the one hand, this is an important acknowledgement of independent cinema; but on the other hand, that cinema is discussed not in terms of its challenge to the dominant cinema, but as a marginal form capable only of occasionally influencing the edges of the mainstream. Thus, Roddick suggests that the Workshop Agreement with the ACTT has brought independent film-making

*a little further back into the mainstream fold. But it will never be entirely recuperated, nor should it wish to be. Its subject matter and its experimental approach occupy the position that the avant-garde has always occupied in all art-forms: a marginal but essential stimulus, occasionally an irritant, doing things that mainstream cinema can't or won't do, and ultimately feeding its results back into the mainstream.*⁵⁷

He goes on to discuss some 'striking works' of independent cinema in the '80s, but only in terms of a) films as products to be consumed – there is no discussion of the concept of integrated practice across production, distribution, exhibition and education; and b) film-makers as auteurs – there is no mention of any workshop films, for instance, and the emphasis is on films which can most easily be understood in terms of the traditional concerns of art cinema or documentary. Finally, it is worth noting that this moment's attention to independent cinema is swamped on the page by a boxed inset profile of producer Leon Clore, an Alan Parker

⁵⁵ Nick Roddick, 'The British Revival', in Fenella Greenfield (ed), *op cit*, p 84.

⁵⁶ *ibid*, p 87.

⁵⁷ *ibid*, p 84.

⁵⁸ Nick Roddick, 'New Audiences, New Films', in Auty and Roddick (eds), op cit, p 24.

⁵⁹ *ibid*, p 26.

⁶⁰ *ibid*.

⁶¹ See Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, op cit, p 156.

⁶² Sheila Whitaker, 'Declarations of Independence', in Auty and Roddick (eds), op cit, p 93.

cartoon about David Puttnam, and a 1½ page full colour reproduction of a *Gandhi* poster!

Roddick develops a similar line in his contributions to *British Cinema Now*. Here, he divides the film industry into two sectors, 'commercial' and 'subsidised'. The latter is further subdivided into three categories, The National Film Finance Corporation (NFFC), the BFI Production Board, and the Regional Arts Associations/workshop production. All these categories are seen as being involved in a different kind of low-budget film-making to the mainstream commercial sector, 'more risky, more experimental and of course more "difficult", both artistically and as a proposition for wider distribution'.⁵⁸ But to collapse together the risks and experiments, the subsidies and the budgets, of the NFFC and the workshops is to mask huge political, aesthetic and economic differences. It is a view which tends to reduce cinema simply to a question of *style* (the BFI Production Board's role is thus seen as 'sponsoring the kinds of stylistic advances without which any film culture will soon die'⁵⁹).

This time, Roddick does (briefly) turn to the regional workshops and the independent sector, which are described as being engaged in something which is

*especially essential in an age in which the culture is predominantly audio-visual: the production of small-scale local projects, designed to give members of a local community hands-on experience of film and video and to enable specific local problems to be examined in either documentary or fictional forms.*⁶⁰

The sentiments seem sincere, but the patronising tone, and the brevity and the context of the discussion tend to marginalise the political implications of local democracy in the media, to ignore the range of practices in the independent sector beyond the provision of community access and the examination of 'local problems', and to prevent any consideration of a policy for 'progressive cultural change'. Similarly, Nowell-Smith's concluding chapter in *British Cinema Now* also seems to assume that the natural route for the independent film-maker is to move from 'small-scale experiment' to 'full-scale commercial production'; thus, he bemoans the loss of the NFFC as a bridge between these two sectors.⁶¹

Sandwiched somewhere between Roddick's and Nowell-Smith's chapters is Sheila Whitaker's much more sympathetic look at the independent movement from the standpoint of the independent exhibitor, which examines it not just as an alternative style, but an oppositional social practice: 'a means of subverting the consumerist cinema'⁶². A brief history of the movement leads into an appraisal of the current situation, and particularly the relationship between production and exhibition, and the question of audiences. While Whitaker's argument is developed outside the liberal-humanist discourse of art cinema, she is still fairly critical of much recent independent work, for what she perceives as a

failure on the part of film-makers to think through the implications of their films for specific audiences. The heroes of her text are the exhibitors for their struggle to construct and work with audiences for independent films. The villains tend too often to be the film-makers for producing inaccessible films. They are further chastised for indulging in an '(embarrassing) rush to submit proposals'⁶³ to Channel 4 in its early days, 'embarrassing' because the TV audience was bound to be different to those for whom their films were originally intended. In part, this seems a quite unjust accusation which ignores the history of the Independent Film and Video Makers Association's long campaign first to get a fourth channel established, and secondly to secure a space for independent work. To seek funding from the channel once it was set up was a logical continuation of the campaign. At the same time, one must agree that the different audience relationship to a film on TV and in the cinema clearly does create problems: is it possible to successfully intervene in the TV schedules, or is the radical moment hopelessly lost in the overwhelming flow of TV material? Whitaker alludes to this in her worry over the difficulty of some of the independent work shown in the early days of Channel 4:

*Even with the best will in the world, TV audiences found it hard to come to terms with films originally designed for an audience of cognoscenti. Thus the problem with which independent exhibitors had struggled—how to build audiences for films which by their nature assume a fairly high level of knowledge of and concern with the issues of film aesthetics, not least those of realism and of social and cultural politics—was brutally and embarrassingly foregrounded.*⁶⁴

The way out of the impasse, she argues, is through a dual campaign of re-thinking the aesthetics of independent cinema, and of programming with specific audience interests in mind, 'in an on-going practice dedicated to key issues and debates'⁶⁵. The first line, she argues, involves a rejection of the

*almost wilful refusal to engage with narrative forms The real challenge . . . lies not in hoping that the desire for narrative will simply go away or in trying to persuade audiences that they should resist it, but in finding ways of intelligently re-creating narrative forms, operating perhaps under a different 'regime of pleasure production', but pleasurable nonetheless.*⁶⁶

Certainly, if independent cinema is to play an interventionist role, it must engage with the formal strategies (including narrative strategies) of the dominant cinema, both de-constructing and re-constructing them. But Whitaker's position tends to construct the pleasures and productivity of cinema in terms of narrative only, and to preclude other ways in which cinema can address issues and make connections. Also, it tends to deflect attention away from the current inadequacies of independent exhibitors. Problems of funding, the necessity for 'good box office', the exigencies of distribution and the presence of Channel 4 together seem

⁶³ *ibid.*, p 89.

⁶⁴ *ibid.*

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, p 93.

⁶⁶ *ibid.*

to have made it very difficult for independent cinemas to engage consistently in the sorts of structured programming – and in particular the programming of a range of independent films and videos – that can make their activities significantly different from either the BFY vision of cinema as spectacular consumption, or the European art cinema variant.

In the absence of a comprehensive and up-to-date survey of recent developments in the independent sector, the current situation can appear quite fragmentary in comparison with the image of a tight-knit community of independent film-makers around the then Independent Film Makers' Association in the '70s. The wide diversity of practices and the address to new and wider audiences that forms the independent sector in the mid-'80s is an important development from that sense of a movement addressing itself – necessary and fruitful though that stage may have been. It also constitutes a significant series of alternative perspectives and practices to those of BFY. Clearly, the production, distribution, promotion and exhibition of films is not finished either as a form of progressive cultural practice or as a source of (marginal) profits for the capitalist leisure industries, but neither use of cinema seems likely to be premised on the notion of cinema-going as a mass, popular and regular social activity. Significantly, both the BFI and the major US and British exhibition circuits are developing a policy of funding a centralised form of exhibition as part of a larger cultural centre offering more than simply the possibility of watching films – hence the BFI-supported media centres (e.g. at Bristol and Manchester), and AMC's and Thorn-EMI's multiplexes (e.g. at Milton Keynes). But while the media centres supported by the BFI are in some ways a part of the independent sector as here defined, their work too often seems to run in the opposite direction to that of, for instance, the film workshops, or Channel 4's *Eleventh Hour*. There is something of a conflict of interests between much independent production and the policies and practices of BFI-supported cinemas and other independent cinemas which have, in a sense, been colonised, in part out of economic adversity, by art house practices. There is a much clearer commonality of interests, for instance, between these exhibition centres and the products of the commercial 'independents' such as Palace and HandMade than there is with the workshops. The key term here would be cinephilia, rather than, say, cultural democracy. What is lacking is a clear commitment to what Simon Blanchard has characterised as

*the basic arguments for cinema exhibition . . . drawn from two overlapping themes: the cinema's place as part of the wider mosaic of public cultural life, as an arena with the potential for collective public enjoyment and debate; and secondly, the need to keep cinemas open as part of a strategy of preserving and extending spaces and options outside the domestic and largely familial context and assumptions of television.*⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Simon Blanchard, *op cit*, p 111.

In this context, it is worth noting the significant range of practices which have developed primarily outside the network of independent

cinemas, ranging from scratch video and Super-8 film to the huge numbers of copies of the Miners' Campaign Tapes distributed by Trade, Platform and others during the 1984-85 strike (uses which, among other things, challenge the common use of video as an essentially private leisure technology). The difference between the art house exhibition of 'modern' fiction films and the use of audio-visual material outside the cinema recalls the split in the British documentary movement of the 1930s between film-makers such as Grierson and Anstey who saw more potential in working outside the commercial industry and those, like Watt, Cavalcanti and Jennings who preferred to struggle for commercial exhibition of their films (and eventually, in the case of Watt and Cavalcanti, joined a commercial studio – Ealing – to make feature films). The recollection is pertinent, since those who remained within the realms of cinema as defined by the majors were taken up critically in terms of their influence on mainstream feature film-making, and their contribution to the development of film as an 'adult art', severing their work from the more challenging cultural politics of the documentary movement of the '30s. The tendency of many of those who remained outside the realms of the commercial industry to work within the field of the instructional documentary, which so rapidly became institutionalised as a conservative form of communication, is also salutary in the context of the recent development of the independent sector.

Crudely speaking, we can say that independent cinema in the '70s was defined very much in terms of a cultural politics of the text, often tending towards formalism. The developing emphasis on the *institution* of independent cinema – the emphasis on labour relations produced in the ACTT Workshop Declaration, and the shift from one-off project funding to revenue funding of workshops – has led to the situation in the mid-'80s where independent cinema is defined much more in terms of its political economy.⁶⁸ At times, it seems that work on the text has been neglected – although perhaps it is that formal questions are now considered much more in relation to the needs of specific audiences, rather than in the abstract, as formal questions *per se*. Certainly, it is important that questions of political economy are not divorced from questions of cultural role.

Perhaps the most significant developments in the independent sector have been around the attempts to set up well-funded regional audio-visual industries in regions like the North East, the West Midlands and London. The aim is to set up alternative infrastructures, which are capable of providing the basis for long-term projects, with finance generated from new sources, and the possibility of competing in the market-place and challenging the multinationals' hegemony over the agenda-setting processes. Both the North East Media Development Council (NEMDC) and the London Industrial Strategy (LIS) aim to generate funds for the independent sector beyond those available from Channel 4 and the BFI. NEMDC thus now comprises a number of workshops, working in both film and video, and producing for both television and film exhibition; distribution and promotion facilities; exhibition outlets locally; and, cru-

⁶⁸ See Jonathan Curling and Felicity Oppé, 'A Declaration of Independence', *Screen* January-February 1983, vol 24 no 1, pp 55-56.

⁶⁹ See *London Industrial Strategy*, ch 5, 'The Cultural Industries', published by the Greater London Council, 1985.

cially, a projected training centre whose policy is to be accessible to and serving the interests of the people of the region.

One of the major developments of the LIS plan for the culture industries⁶⁹ is its proposal to explore not only local council subsidies for independent groups, but also, and crucially, council *investment*, especially in the distribution process. This represents an important shift away from the traditional forms of state patronage of the 'high' arts, premised on the ideology of the individual creative artist, and away also from the situation where the independent sector is defined by the funding agencies and their production and distribution policies. Clearly the near future is going to be difficult, however, with the government's decision to dismantle the Greater London Council and the other Metropolitan County Councils.

In terms of the democratisation of cultural production and communication, developments such as these are far more important than anything BFY has done. It is noticeable that while its education programme could have formed the basis for the transformation of what is normally understood by cinema exhibition, it has been conducted quite separately from cinema-going. In other words, the BFY project is dominated by a conception of the audience as purchasers of tickets. There is no attempt to develop the cinema's potential as a place for discussion, debate and audience participation.

(I would like to thank Steve Pinh y and Simon Blanchard for their comments on an earlier draft of this article).